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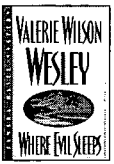

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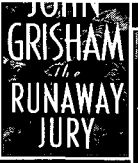

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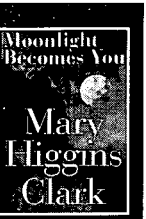

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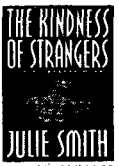

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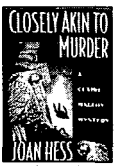

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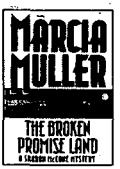

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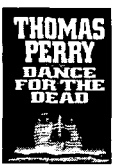

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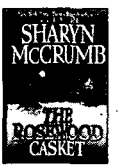

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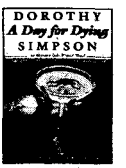

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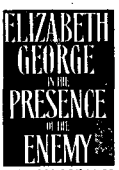

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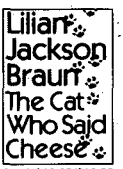

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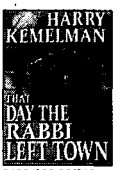

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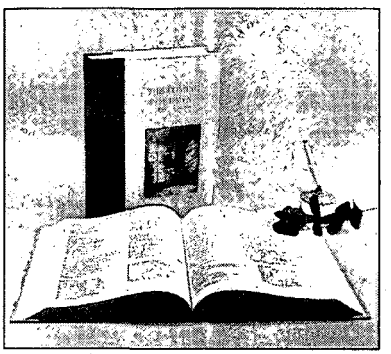
Poetry Contest
$48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months



AThe National Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like The Coming of Dawn, pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world.

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that $48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in ***ONLY ONE*** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry
Suite 6124
1 Poetry Plaza
Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

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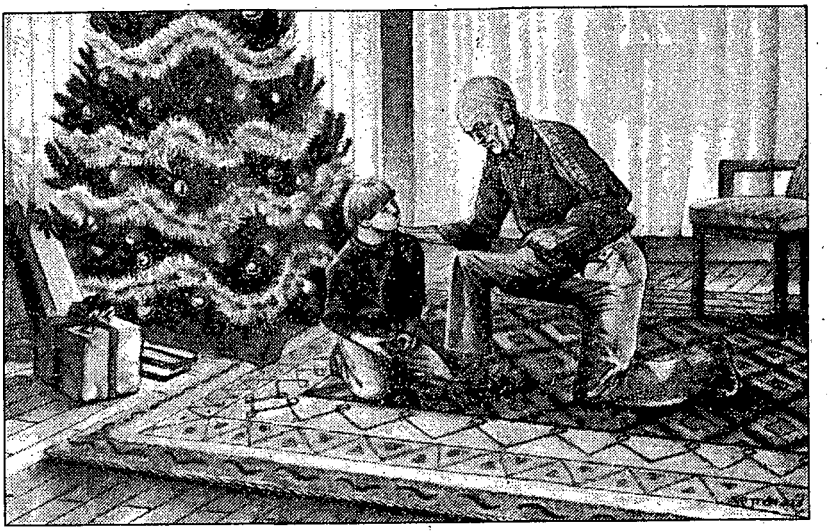

Art by Darryl Elliott

FUNNY STORY

by Larry Beinhart

My father is visiting for the holidays. He's an old man now. I'm not exactly young either. At least not the way they used to measure men. Pushing fifty. Pushing it quite hard, actually.

My son is six, pushing seven. At that age you can't push hard enough. Time flows like treacle, black, sweet, slow, thick, and sticky. You can't move it fast enough. If you charge into it you just get tangled up and slowed down, then you end up in the bath.

At my age, when you would give whatever there is to give to slow the metronome down, it seems an enviable state. But try telling that to a kid racing to be a race driver, fireman, policeman, wrestler, Power Ranger, space scientist, karate fighter. Generation upon generation tries to tell their kids that, and each ageing parent sounds like a jerk when he does. Even my father did. I don't mention that, however.

David, my son, spills his juice on the rug. His mother, my wife,

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starts scolding, and I go to get paper towels to sop it up. "I told you to be careful of the rug," she says. "It's a valuable, very valuable piece. How many times have I told you never to bring drinks on that rug."

"It's an old rug," David says. Which is true.

My father looks at me with something less than a wink. Possibly a twinkle. As if to say, listen to this, this is how mothers and sons talk, for all time, what a pleasure to hear this.

"The rug was a gift from your grandfather. It's from the old country, and it's a very valuable piece." What a curious expression, "the old country." It makes it sound as if we came from one of those rustic, peasanty nations that mercantilism and the industrial revolution had more or less bypassed, someplace like Rumania, Albania, Ireland, or the Ukraine.

Due to his having been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship to Oxford University, Larry Beinhart's "Funny Story" was first published in the U.K., where it received the British Crime Writers Association's gold dagger award. Mr. Beinhart is also the author of four novels, including *No One Rides for Free,* which brought him the coveted Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America in 1987.

"Is it as old as Grandpop?" David says, awe in his voice that lets us know that Grandpop is about as old a thing, let alone as old a person, as he can imagine. Grandpop is pretty old, and he looks old, with wrinkles and liver spots and wisps of hair to highlight the baldness of his liver-spotted, wrinkly dome. Big veins stand out on his hands, and his fingers move stiffly and painfully, arthritic as well as just old.

"Older," Grandpop says.

"Did you get it new?" David asks.

It's a big old rug, twelve feet by eighteen feet, a Persian. Handmade, hand knotted, with an intricate pattern. I've been told how many knots per square inch but I've forgotten, and experts, when they look at it, instantly exclaim things about the pattern and the clan and, most of all, about its probable price. I can't. I just know it's the second most valuable thing we own. It's worth less than the

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house, but more than the car, a five-year-old Lexus. But, like the good old Persian it is, in a house with a son and a daughter and a dog and a cat and, from time to time, rabbits, gerbils, and wounded birds, it looks old and faded and worn and as comfortable as a home.

"No, not really," Grandpop says.

"Did you get it at, like, a garage sale, or an auction?" David asks. He's been to lots and lots of both. We've furnished the house, except for the rug and one or two other bits, from garage sales and auctions. This is not to say that it looks like Levittown leftovers. My wife is a woman of terrific taste, which she combines with immense ferocity in her search for true value. For her, anything short of getting a $1,400 chair for $225 is a furnishing defeat.

"Would you like me to tell you a story about that rug?" Grandpop says.

David looks doubtful. Furniture acquisition stories don't thrill him. He's really had his fill of them. When my wife does make a furnishing score, she not only brings the item home, she brings the tale of its purchase with it: the days, weeks, months of searching; the revelatory moment of finding; the strategy and tactics of the negotiation; and a blow-by-blow of the bargaining.

"You'll like it, it's a funny story," his grandfather says.

David is not convinced. Then I, like a schmuck, which means jewel in German but means schmuck in English, say, "That's not a good story for him."

"Tell me, Grandpop," David says.

"Pop," I say. Why I imagine I can still head this off, I don't know. Maybe I don't. Maybe I just think it is the responsible, parental thing to try.

"What? The boy shouldn't know?"

Maybe he shouldn't. "He's a little young."

"Maybe I won't be here next year to tell him."

Try to argue with that. But, nonetheless, I did. "You will. I say he's not ready. If, God forbid, you're not here, I'll tell him. When the time comes."

"Tell me," David says. Of course. "I want to know."

"What's this 'God forbid' stuff?" my father asks me.

"It's a turn of phrase."

"It's superstition," he says, more fiercely than seems called for.

"Okay, it's superstition. I'm superstitious; I would like you to come back next year and for many years to come."

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"How did you get the rug, Grandpop?"

His grandfather gets out of his chair with creaks and groans and sighs. Not the furniture, the man. And gets down on his knees on the floor. He rolls back a corner of the rug. "Look at this," he says. "This is fine, fine wool. Strong wool. It wears like iron. Woven by hand, the threads are tied by hand. The dyes they use in this, they'll last hundreds of years. Today they make millions of everything, carpets, cars, toys, pens, books, chairs, glasses, silverware. They make it fast, they make it cheap. I'm not saying that's bad, or that the stuff they make is bad. I'm not an old curmudgeon, can't move with the times, stuck in the past, can't appreciate progress. I like progress, I like to see everybody, every working man and woman, with washers and dryers and summer clothes and sports clothes and ski clothes and running shoes, walking shoes, aerobic shoes, tennis shoes, dress shoes, shoes with winking red lights in the heel. Them I like especially.

"But you should understand, boy, that once upon a time, not everything came out of a plastic extruder by the twenty millions. Once things were made by hand. One at a time. And there weren't so many, many, many things. There were just a few things. Even for rich people, there weren't so very many things. So each thing became more important. Can you imagine going to the pawn shop . . . does he know what a pawn shop is?"

"Ask him, not me," I say.

"What's a pawn shop, David?"

"I don't know."

"It's a place where you leave something valuable and they loan you money."

"Dad just uses his card at the bank."

"Right," Grandpop says, "I understand. Me too. But once, they didn't do that. When you borrowed money you had to leave something tangible behind. Something that the person who loaned you the money could hold on to, even sell if you didn't pay back. In the old days, you could leave a coat and borrow money."

"A coat?" David says, incredulous. As well he might in these days of cheap and, truth to be told, disposable clothing.

"Right, exactly. Material things, they had value. Not just big things like cars, but watches and jackets, even hats. And rugs."

"How did you get the rug, Grandpop?"

I just sighed and shook my head.

"I stole it," he says.

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I throw up my hands, make the sound of exasperation, drop my hands, and shake my head.

"You stole it?"

"Pop, do you have to do this?"

"Yes, I stole it," David's grandfather says without a trace of shame. Even embarrassment. Without a thought of discretion.

"What kind of role model, what kind of ideas are you putting in my son's head?"

"Just truth," he says.

"It's not funny," I say.

"There's funny and there's funny," he says.

"My dad says not to steal things. He makes me give things back when I steal them," my wonderful son says.

"Your father is absolutely right," the subversive old man says without a hint of sincerity.

"Did you steal a lot of things?" my son asks.

"You bet," his grandfather says.

"Great, just great," I say.

"Really, Grandpop?" David says, as wide-eyed and fascinated as you would expect.

"Really, David," Grandpop says. "I was a thief."

I suspect that damage is being done here that will take me years to undo. A rogue, an absolute rogue.

"I was more than a thief. I was about the best thief in Munich. Which was a very great place to be a thief because it was then, as it is now, a very rich city. With many rich people who loved expensive things. As they do now. Even though then there was a depression and what is called hyperinflation. Do you know what hyperinflation is?"

"He's six, for God's sake," I point out.

"Like in Brazil," my son says. What does he know about Brazil? The kid hardly knows how to buy a candy bar and get correct change.

"It means that every day the money is worth less. Yesterday a candy bar is fifty cents, tomorrow it costs a dollar. A week later, you need two dollars. Then five dollars. In two, three weeks, a candy bar costs ten dollars. Then twenty. That's hyperinflation. So it was better to have things than to have money. I never stole money. You understand why?"

"Stealing money is bad?" my son offers as a reason not to steal money. That's the reason he learned at home.

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"Because when you have hyperinflation money is worthless. It's junk. It's garbage."

My wife, listening to this, begins to gesture at me frantically. This is a conversation I'm not looking forward to. I'm a fairly weak-willed fellow, or, if you wish to be polite, easygoing, and I tend to go whichever way the wind blows. What it is, I'm actually pretty resilient and self-satisfied, so a lot of things just don't matter to me because there is something at the center that stays fairly pleased with itself even when the weather changes. And they are both, my father and my wife, very strong-willed people. I have never been able to silence either one of them or stop either one of them from saying what they thought needed saying, however little it actually needed saying.

"I'll make some tea," I said. Why? Why not say, Pop, I'm going into the kitchen so my wife can tell me to tell you to shut up because this is most emphatically not a story for a six-year-old boy. Theft is just the beginning. There's violence and despair and murder.

"He's six years old, for God's sake," my wife says. Severely.

"No kidding," I say.

"Well, aren't you going to stop him?"

"Why don't you stop him?" I say.

"He's your father," she says. This is marital tennis. Not a match game by any means, really just a warmup, stroking matters back and forth.

"He knows David is six. So maybe he has some reason for telling it now."

"Don't be ridiculous, what reason could there be for telling a six year old his grandfather was a thief, a professional thief."

"He was, to hear him tell it, the prince of thieves. He was a cat burglar. Actually he rather relishes himself as Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief.*"

"That doesn't make it better," my wife says.

I say, "Achievement is always to be admired."

She is not amused. She says so. She is frequently not amused. I frequently dream about being away from news of nonamusement.

"Maybe he wants to tell David to always be the best you can be, no, the best there is, no matter what your field of endeavor. And do it with style and panache. I mean, my father was no worse, or not much worse, than D'Artagnan." David and I are reading *The Three Musketeers* together. What a revelation to rediscover them.

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Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan were appalling by contemporary standards. They're all common brawlers who go around drinking in bars then refusing to pay then getting into knife fights and stabbing people, sometimes to death. All right, the knives are really big and they call them swords, but I can't see the difference. On the moral plane, at any rate. Porthos and Aramis both live off of women. D'Artagnan claims to be in love with one woman, makes love to another without a moment's hesitation, then jumps all over the second woman's maid, not even out of lust, but so he can use her. I am more than faintly envious. Athos, the most noble and sensitive and aristocratic of the bunch, murders his wife. Twice. Why? Because he discovered that she had once been convicted of a crime, had been branded, as in having a brand burnt into her flesh with a hot iron just like they do to cows in cowboy movies. The only remotely moral message implicit in these events seems to be, get it right the first time.

"Tell him to stop," she says.

"No."

"Tell him," she commands. Demands. Requires.

"Why don't you tell him?" I suggest, sensibly, thoughtfully, fairly.

"He's your father," she says.

I resist the temptation to say, I knew that. I say, "Exactly."

"So? You have to stand up for your family, and this is your family, your wife and your child. . . ." This is just the windup, a prepositional phrase, as it were, for a lengthy and major statement which will be delivered with such fervor and eloquence that, right or wrong, I will certainly feel that her position is unassailable and not to be denied.

There is only one chance, and that is to head her off at the pass, fire off a few shots, spook the lead animal, and turn the stampede in a different direction.

"It's because he's my father that you should tell him," I say. "My emotional involvement, and his, the roles, father and son, parent and child, are permanent, you know. They never go away. You can't unravel them with your parents—in spite of four years of therapy. I'm not criticizing you," I hasten to add. Though I probably am. Though I couldn't say what I need to say without saying it. So what do you do with that? It is a huge amount of work to have a conversation with my wife. I'm tired of it. "I'm just saying that if *I* say it, we get involved in a whole to-do about the parent-

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child relationship and lots of emotional shit. If *you* tell him, you can tell him adult to adult; in fact, you will probably assume the dominant role as parent, which you are to David, and since my father's really playing a boy-to-boy thing with David, that puts you in a superior position."

"It's your responsibility," she says.

"Morally, that's true. I agree with you a hundred percent." That's one of my best tactics with her. It's very important to her to be right and morally correct. "However, pragmatically, if we want him to stop, he's more likely to listen to you."

Her mouth opens. She wants more to come out.

"You're absolutely correct," I tell her, before more comes out. "It is my responsibility. But if I do it, it won't work. If you do it, it will."

"All right," she says. Disdainful of my ineffectuality—but not unbearably so, this time—she goes back into the living room.

As we go back in we hear David ask, "Why did you steal? Was it because you were hungry and your children were starving?" He has heard that some people steal because they must. This is the legacy of liberalism in our immediate culture and in our house: Criminality comes from deprivation. When, and if, it is ever true, I suppose it imparts more than an excuse, a certain legitimacy, even nobility, to theft: 'I would steal before I would let my family starve.' Don Corleone morality. However, it is rarely true. The starving tend to just go on and starve, and to the degree they steal it is to snatch the bread off the plates of those starving beside them, not by launching daring raids on the manor house on the hill.

"I stole because I wanted to," my grandfather tells my son.

"Isidore," my wife says, commandingly.

"One minute," Izzy says. "You see, I came from a fine family. My grandfather—you see, I had a father and he had a father, I know that you know that but to think about it and see it in your mind, that's something else. My grandfather was a rabbi. And he had three sons and one daughter.

"His youngest son was a doctor. . . ."

My wife doesn't interrupt even though her command has gone unheeded. Perhaps because this part is all right, this is sort of noble family history, roots, capable of generating lots of sentiment, and she likes that sort of thing.

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"That doctor was my father. He was very scientific, very secular, and very assimilated. Do you know what assimilated means?"

"Or secular, for that matter," I put in.

"No," my son says.

"Do you know what a rabbi is?" my grandfather asks.

"Yes," my son says. "He's like a priest. For Jewish people. And I'm part Jewish."

"Right," my wife says. She's the one who's brought him to temple, though she's not Jewish at all. I'm totally secular. As was my father. Totally. Even adamantly.

"And assimilated, it means that we became, as much as we could, just like the other people around us. You are completely American. We were as German as Germans could be. We loved Bach and Wagner and read Goethe and respected learning and orderliness. Except . . ."

"Except what?"

"Except for me," Grandpop says. "My father had three sons. One became a medical doctor, as he was. One became a professor of chemistry, and the third became the black sheep of the family."

"And that was you!" David cries with delight.

"Isidore, would you come into the kitchen. Now," my wife says.

"What for?"

"I don't know how you like your tea."

"A little bit of cream, two sugars," he says. "Cubes, if you have them. I like sugar cubes."

"Because I want to talk to you," she says.

"All right," he says, getting up off the floor with even more creaks and sighs than he required to get down there. "There was so much goodness and orderliness around," he says. "And I had so much sap in me, I just couldn't stand it."

"Now, please," my wife says.

"Is Mom going to let Grandpop finish his story?" David asks me as they disappear into the kitchen/conference room.

"I wouldn't like to bet on it either way," I say. I'm curious myself who's going to win this little to-do.

"Dad, can we go to the video store?" he says.

"Sure."

"I want to get a movie called *To Catch a Thief,*" he says. "Have you ever seen it?"

"Yes."

"Will I like it?"

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"Well, if I remember, it's got a lot of love stuff in it . . ."

"Yuchy."

". . . but aside from that you should like it."

They return from the kitchen. My son and I look toward them, searching their faces for clues as to what will ensue. It's real clear. My father has a slight smile on his face. If you're in a bad mood it can look like a sneer. I remember it well from growing up. And how it used to infuriate me. My wife, on the other hand, looks pale and chastened. I wonder what he could possibly have said to her. I've never achieved that effect. I guess I still have something to learn from the old man.

Isidore lowers himself slowly down to the floor. More creaks, groans, sighs. My wife goes back into the kitchen, hastening, it turns out, to bring him his tea, as he likes it, though not with sugar cubes. We've never had them around. I suspect we are about to start stocking them. She also brings a plate of some not very sweet, adult sort of cookies for Grandpop to share with David.

From where I sit the Christmas tree more or less frames them. Strings of light little wooden sleds and Santas and elves all made cheaply in China hanging from the branches, along with glass balls and an eclectic assortment of thisment and thatment of ornaments assembled over the years. Presents in patterned paper and glittery ribbons are spread out on the floor behind them.

"Christmas was our best season," Grandpop says. "I had a partner. A young man named Jurgen. This was a very strange time. Germany had its Jew laws, these were laws that were separating out the Jews from the German people. For us, this was very confusing because we saw ourselves as Germans, as Jews hardly at all. But Jurgen and I had become friends before all that and we stayed friends, chasing girls together—you're too young for that, yes?"

"I like girls," David says.

"But not like that," I explain. Though it should not need explanation. "He means he hasn't reached the age where he won't play with girls, not that he's reached the age, which comes after that, where all he wants to do is play with girls."

"Of course," Grandpop says. "We liked what kids nowadays call life in the fast lane. Cash, clothes, cars." As if suddenly remembering who is in his audience, he adds, with an admonishing finger, a gesture he has surely copied from somewhere because I know it is

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not innate to him—when he wanted to make a point, a blow, though openhanded and mild, was more his style— "Of course, I would be very unhappy if you were to be that way. You should be more like my brothers. Students. Men of learning. Respected. You understand?"

"Sure," David says, tuning right into his grandfather's conspiracy to commit hypocrisy. In his short life the only things he has ever expressed a desire to be when he grows up are things that are defined as testosterone-driven activities, things with fighting, fires, vehicles, guns. From today we can add stealing.

"Jurgen was the outside man. I was the inside man. He had a way with serving girls that you would not believe. They loved him. They had but to meet him and their eyes would get big and round like cows' eyes and they would look up at him like this." He rolls his head around with a motion that quite definitely evokes mooing and cud chewing. "And they would tell him everything. What the family they worked for was buying as presents, when they were going visiting, when the houses would be empty. I was helping Jewish families sell their jewelry, so I knew a lot of the jewelers. I would get information from them about people buying expensive jewelry. Also there were several that were not so honest who would buy the jewelry we stole.

"Finally, there were a few who worked with us. When they sold expensive pieces they would tell us. Then we would steal it and we would sell it back to them."

"Cool," David says.

"Isidore," my wife says, very sternly. It is a tone of voice I have come to loathe.

"Sorry," Grandpop says, sounding just like I do when I'm making a meaningless pro forma acknowledgment. My wife glares at me. Of course.

"Anyway, Christmas would come, and we would have our houses picked out. We would know what was inside, or enough to know it was worthwhile taking the risk. And how to get in and when the house would be empty. The maid's rooms in big houses were usually way up on top, and sometimes a window would be left open for us.

"I was the cat," he says, leaning forward, smiling and immensely pleased with himself. "I could climb, I could get my fingertips into the smallest crack, I could stand on the narrowest

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ledge. And I could jump from one hold to the next. To do this you have to be two things: fearless and skinny. I was both.

"Other times I would pick the lock. . . ." He looks down at his cramped old hands and sighs for the dexterity that they once had and the youth that it represented and all that went with that youth. "Or cut the glass. There were many ways. None of which a well brought up young man like yourself should know," he adds. No need to mention that he had been as well brought up as David. Better, in fact. Isidore was the son of a doctor, grandson of a rabbi. David was the son of a composer of advertising jingles, grandson of a thief.

"Anyway, we had costumes. Jurgen would dress as Father Christmas, Santa Claus. I would dress in very dark, dark green, almost black, so that I would be invisible in the dark, and smear dark green makeup on my face so even the white of my face would not catch the light, but, if a policeman were to stop us, I would say that I was one of the elves from the Black Forest, one of Father Christmas's helpers. Most of the things we stole would still be wrapped, you see, so we would say we were going to a party and bringing the gifts."

"Did that actually work?" I blurt out, incredulous.

"Only once was it put to the test," he says.

"Why are you filling our son's head with this, this terrible nonsense?" my wife says.

"It's the story of the rug," he says. Innocently. "It's a funny story."

"Is this true?" she asks.

"As God is my witness," my father says. And who knows what that means. To whatever degree he believes in God, he is very, very angry with him. And finds his deeds unforgivable. At least that's what he's told me.

"Can we at least not wallow in the details," my wife says.

"Of course, Moira," he says. "Not an unnecessary word. I will cut to the chase."

"Thank you," she says.

"So, on this particular Christmas, we are doing pretty well. We get into this big mansion that is close to the Englischer Gardens, which is a big park in Munich, like Central Park in New York or Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. What I'm there for is a diamond bracelet, I forget now the details of carats and number of diamonds, but this was worth, today, fifty, sixty thousand dollars.

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Lots of diamonds, lots of glitter, a real showpiece. Also there was hidden away a lesser piece, worth maybe fifteen, twenty thousand. One was for the wife, one was for the mistress. Plus there were many other things, the silver, small art pieces, whatever was small and valuable. Plus they had children. Close to the ages of my children then, who were—one was younger than you, and one, the girl, was exactly your age. Very pretty she was, and like you she had blond hair. So did I when I was young and I had hair. Not these white wisps . . ."

The phone rang. I went to answer it. I knew the next bit. My father saw the rug there. He recognized it. It had belonged to a very rich Jewish banker in Munich, someone very well known at the time, but whose name meant nothing to me and would mean nothing to David. My father recognized it because he had robbed the previous owner some years earlier. He had admired it then. It was, he said, the best Persian he had ever seen. Now he could not resist it.

The phone call was from one of our neighbors, a sweet young woman named Elaine. She's a widow, but reasonably well off, very attractive, with dark eyes, black hair, and a full figure. Our daughter is visiting her daughter, and Elaine is calling to find out if I will be coming over to pick Susan up or if she should deliver her. I say I'll come over, which I know is what she wants to hear. It's easier for her and means that we might be able to spend a few adult minutes together. I tell her it will be an hour or so. Elaine says to come whenever I can, when I can will be all right.

When I hang up the phone Moira is standing there. She has that I-have-things-to-say look in her eye. Actually it is a look that is rarely absent, even when she is saying the things.

"What," I ask her, preemptively, "did my father say to you? To blackmail you into letting him finish telling this tale of the Yiddisher-Deutscher Robin Hood?"

"He said that he had been to the doctor and that he doubted he would be here another year and that he wanted David to know his story, from his lips."

"Can't argue with that," I say, somewhat surprised. He hasn't said anything to me about exceptionally imminent death. He looks pretty damn good. For his age. And, of course, he is prone to dramatization and exaggeration. Especially when he wants to get his way.

"No," she says.

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"I have to confess," my father says as we walk back into the room, "that although I had a very lovely wife, who was incidently a perfect mother to my two children . . ."

"Is that my grandmother?" David asks.

"No. That was my first wife," my father says. "The banker, who originally owned the rug, had a very beautiful daughter. Like a princess in a fairy tale. She had spurned me, and I thought it would impress her for me to have the rug."

"Do we have to go into that?" my wife asks.

"It's the story of the rug," my father says as if the rug has its own life, its own fervent history crying out to be told, a tale that it needs to pass on to posterity. "I'm just trying to be fully honest here."

"Don't," I say. "Don't overdo it."

"Okay," he says. "I can see that it is time to make a long story short. I will not thrill you, little David, with how I slipped out the back door, crept through the bushes and trees on the ground, carrying not just my usual swag, but this huge rug on my back. And how Jurgen, my partner, swore at me as a madman when I brought it to the car. How I was adamant that we take it. Why? I don't know why. We all need a little mystery in what we do. Isn't that correct?

"This was Christmas Eve. Jurgen and I, we split up our take, which was considerable. Very considerable. It was late and he took me home. I had the rug, of course.

"I went upstairs with all my things. My wife, Sarah, was waiting. My children, David and Judith, were sleeping. I kissed my wife and then went, right away, just as your father does with you, to see my sleeping children. There is something about coming home and finding your children safe and sound, healthy, asleep in their beds, blankets tucked around them, that is better, I think, than almost anything else in the world. Ask your father if this is not true?"

David looks at me. Moira likes this part. She beams. "Yes," I say, "it's true." It's true, and yet there are fathers, and mothers, who give it up. Or who give up a lot of it—except for alternate weekends, a week in the summer, and practically never on Christmas—because baser emotions like lust and anger are stronger than the sentimentalities of our higher feelings.

"I kissed them on their foreheads," my father says. "Then I added their extra gifts, those I had picked up from rich people's

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homes in the course of the night, to the ones we already had. I put them under the tree, just like you have here. Then I sat with my wife and we counted our blessings. Our children being the chief ones.

"Not long after we went to bed there was a commotion in the street. Noise downstairs. Then at the door. It sounded like someone was kicking the door down."

"Was it the cops?" David asks.

"I thought so. But I was ready for that. I was prepared, I had a plan, I had an esccape route.

"We lived on the top floor. I always kept the stolen stuff, the valuable stolen stuff, if it was in the house at all, in one bag. I could get cut to the roof from the window. Once I was on the roof, I was free and clear. Remember, I was the cat. I was from our roof to the next building, then the next, and down the drainpipes into the alley. From the alley I could get into the basement of the apartment building across the way. And soon I would disappear.

"So I turned to Sarah and I said, 'Don't worry, it's me they want. You just tell them I'm not home. You haven't seen me.' I looked at the rug. I wondered if it would give me away. The thing about Persian rugs is, for the most part you have to know something about them to know if it's a good one or a bad one or a real one or a fake one. So, quickly, even as we heard the footsteps on the stairs, we spread it across the floor. It was a little bit too big so we just folded the end under. I was certain that no one would recognize its value or recognize it as stolen.

"Then, just as the knock on the door came, I went out the window with my bag of swag and took off across the rooftops."

"Did you get away?" David asks.

"Yes," my grandfather says. "I got away."

"Is that the end of the story?" my wife asks.

"It can't be," David says. "What about the rug?"

My father smiles. Or rather his mouth twitches toward a smile and the smile, that smirk that used to so infuriate me, dies, stillborn. As well it should.

"I went back in the morning."

"Christmas," my wife says.

"Yes. Christmas. Sarah and David and Judith were gone."

"Where? Where did they go?" my son asks.

"The knock on the door. That wasn't the police looking for a thief. It was the brownshirts, the Nazis, looking for Jews. And

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they found some. Two of them sleeping, waiting to wake in the morning to see what gifts Father Christmas had brought them in the night. Two of them and their mother. They took them away."

"What happened to them?" David asks.

"Immediately? I don't know," my father says. "In the end, the camps. The ovens. I don't know. Disappeared. Never to be seen again."

My son looks at me. He's not following this. He doesn't have enough information to know what the camps and the ovens mean. To him camp is a place to go and play. Summer camp, arts and crafts, learning to swim, dodge ball. Ovens are where cakes are made and bread is baked. So now I have to tell him.

Which I try to do as simply as possible. "Not very long ago," I say, "when your grandfather was a young man, the people of Germany decided they wanted to get rid of all the Jews. To kill all the Jews. They did this very methodically. As if they were building cars. It was a very terrible thing."

"Why?" my son asks.

"People do terrible things," I say. "Very terrible things. This was one of the worst. But there are others." It is one of those things, of course, for which my father will never forgive God. I tend to agree with him.

"Was that your mommy?" David asks.

"No," I say. "Grandpa married another woman later."

"They took the children's toys, all the Christmas gifts. They left our little tree. And the rug."

Now what's odd is that my father finishes the story there. He hasn't really told the story of the rug. And there is a story of the rug and it's quite a tale. Like many other Jews, especially assimilated Jews who thought of themselves as more German than most of the Germans they knew, he thought that this anti-Semitism was just a bulge in the political hieroglyphics of history and that, like many other excesses, it would reach a high tide and recede. At that point he suddenly understood that things were much, much worse and much more permanent than that.

He and his friend Jurgen, who adamantly did not want to be drafted, decided to escape Germany for Switzerland. It was not so easy then as it is now to cross a border. Also neither of them wanted to arrive in a new country totally broke. They wanted to get away with their loot. Jurgen had at one point worked for an industrialist who had a vacation château on Lake Lucerne. Then

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they thought of the rug. They could put their loot—and Isidore—in the rug, the rug in a truck, and claim they were delivering it to the château.

This they proceeded to do.

I've heard my father tell this tale more than once. Sometimes there is a policeman in it. A German cop who catches them at a roadside inn just at the moment when Jurgen is bringing food out to the truck and Isidore is crawling out of the rug.

They kill the cop.

They are afraid that the corpse will be found and that they will be caught in the ensuing hue and cry. So they drive off with the corpse, looking for a place to dispose of it.

Somehow, when you're looking to do something like that, there never seems to be a right moment at the right place. At every right place there are people present. Whenever you're alone there's no place. The nightmare continued, hour after hour, as they approached the Swiss border. Finally they were out of time and out of possible places to dump the dead. They wrapped the cop in the rug—along with Izzy—and crossed into Switzerland, the dead German lying snug beside the running Jew.

That is the story of the rug. Usually.

But my father doesn't say any of that. He ends it there and says, "A funny story, no?"

"No," Moira says. "I don't see anything funny about it at all."

"Well, it's a Jewish story," Grandpop says. He shrugs. "Some people don't get them." But that's because he has not laid the punch line on us yet.

He gets up from his sitting position, to his knees, on the rug, and puts his big, old, veined and spotted hands on my son, touching his shoulders and the fine, soft hairs on his head, which still, sometimes, even now, on the odd and special day, have the sweet smell of puppy fur. "I was a very wild young man," he says. "I did many, many things that were bad. Things that you should never do. If only because I don't think . . . I don't think the rewards are worth the risk.

"Still, I don't regret them.

"I regret only one thing. That I abandoned my wife and my children. I pretend to excuse it in that I couldn't know what would happen. But really, you see, the statement should go the other way. If you are a man, a real man, you should never leave your

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wife and children alone, exactly because you do not know what will happen.

"In this," he tells David, "you are very lucky. Because your father is a better man than I am. He will never abandon you. He will never leave you alone. This I know."

My father is a wily old man. As well as having been a wicked one. But how has he divined that that is exactly what I want most to do in the world? Is his telling the tale this way, with this moral, some random event that I am, in my guilt, very attuned to? Is he a messenger, sent by fate, not knowing what he is really saying, sent to warn me of the consequences of my action? Or is this David's grandfather, quite conscious of what he is doing, wily and manipulative, cleverly herding David's father back into line?

I had gathered my strength, my strength for coping, once again, just to make it through the holidays, planning my escape for the cold clarity that I anticipate for January. There's a sweeter woman who flushes with warmth when she sees me and welcomes me in, into her arms, into her heart, into her body. Dark eyes that seem to swallow me whole and flood me with endorphins or whatever chemicals the chemistry of love consists of, so that I feel free of pain and fear. Away from the spats and the sniping and the sword that lies down the middle of the bed where my heart and Moira's used to lie entwined.

My father, who brought this rug to America—where he gave up his thieving ways, he says, and opened a jewelry store—and gave it to me as a wedding gift, has come about the other gifts he has given me.

Among those other gifts that he has given me are loyalty, love of family, and the cherishing of children. I didn't know that those gifts came with an enforcer. Who would show up at the crucial moment with a warning parable. He has put a kineahora on me. I suddenly feel that if I leave them, the evil that men do will come and steal them away and kill them, leaving the weight of their fate on my soul, a curse for which I can never forgive God.

I look at Moira and wonder if there is any way, any way whatsoever back to the garden?

I look at my father, expecting that infuriating smile to be on his lips and see, instead, only pleading eyes, and I know that I will stay at home. With my family and the goddamn rug. ●

For Jurgen Burger

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MONEY FACE

by Doug Allyn

To finish out a year of top-notch short story writing, Doug Allyn ventures into the private-eye arena for a tale set on the mean streets of Dearborn, Michigan. Mr. Allyn has also just completed a book-length manuscript based on his *EQMM* story "The Cross Wolf." Look for it under the title *A Dance in Deep Water* in early 1997. ✝

The pawnshop owner didn't seem nervous. Odd. He probably knew who I was and why I was there. He should have been antsy as a roach on a griddle. But he wasn't. He dismissed me with a be-with-you-in-a-minute wave and continued talking to his only customer, a dead-eyed crackhead in a grubby tan trench coat who was trying to hock a radio. The owner was a large man, a heavyset Lebanese with sensual features. His dark hair was combed into a slick pompadour that would have done an Elvis imitator proud. He was wearing a charcoal vest and slacks, and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showing off thick wrists matted with dark hair. His name was Soliman Chehab, or so I'd been told.

He listened with feigned patience while the junkie rambled on about his boombox. "Big sound, man. Gargantuous." He punched up an earsplitting rap station to prove his point. I wandered down one of the aisles to avoid the noise. Solly's Pawn and Loan had the usual storefront hockshop merchandise: TVs, microwaves, guitars, secondhand shotguns and rifles. I did a quick mental audit. At auction, the store's inventory might bring a hundred and forty grand, a hundred and fifty if the owner was lucky. But he'd already proved he wasn't lucky, or I wouldn't be here.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked, as he moved cautiously up beside me. He was mid twentyish, with olive skin and a narrow face. He was wearing a white shirt, no tie, and a dark sportcoat at least a size too big. He seemed jumpy. Kept glancing back at the

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owner. I couldn't tell whether he knew what the situation here was, or if it was just me. I take up a lot of space, and the scars on my face often make people uneasy. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Especially when I have to collect money from people who aren't altogether sure that they owe it.

"Do you have any guitars that aren't on display?" I asked.

"Guitars?" the kid echoed, surprised. "No, what you see is what we got. What kind you looking for?"

"Something collectible," I said. "An old Les Paul, or maybe a Fender Telecaster."

"How about this one," he said, taking a Les Paul down from the display rack on top of the counter. "A '58 gold top, mint shape. Seven hundred bucks." He stifled a yawn.

"Late night?" I asked.

"Early morning," he said. "It's supposed to be my day off. What do you think about the guitar?"

I thought it was a copy, a '74 reissue, but it was the only guitar in sight that wasn't a piece of crap. And I do collect guitars. When I'm not collecting other people's money. "It might do. Got a case for it?"

"I think so." He jumped as the buzzer on the store's front door went off. Another customer had come in. "The cases are down at the end of the aisle," he said, visibly relaxing. "Help yourself. I'll be right back."

He hurried away to the office, moving confidently now. I drifted to the end of the aisle where guitar cases were stacked atop each other in a haphazard mishmash. The case for the Les Paul was near the bottom, naturally. I knelt to check it over . . . and froze. I'd heard a metallic *kersnick,* the sound of a pistol slide being drawn back to chamber a round. I stayed where I was, concealed by the stack of guitar cases. The sound came again, twice, followed by a hard thump. What the hell? I snuck a quick peek around the corner of the stack. The clerk was sprawled in the office doorway. I didn't see any blood, but his body was twisted at an unnatural angle. Something was wrong here. Big time. A robbery?

I pulled back, desperately glancing around for a weapon or a place to hide. Nothing. The room was a dead end filled with guitars and amps. I caught a movement in a curved shoplifter's mirror mounted near the ceiling at the corner of the room.

A guy stepped out of the office over the clerk's body and headed down the aisle toward me. He was wearing a dark overcoat and hat. Couldn't see his face, but he was carrying a pistol in each hand, checking the spaces between the counters as he came, look-

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ing for me. I stayed crouched, praying he wouldn't glance up and spot me in the mirror. As he approached the stack of guitar cases, I crawled around the aisle on the opposite side, keeping low as he moved past me.

And then I was up, sprinting for the front door. I vaulted over the clerk's body, glimpsed the owner crumpled behind the counter, and then I hit the door. Locked! I tugged frantically at it, but it wouldn't budge. Damn! I heard a crash behind me. No time! The shooter was coming. I grabbed the heaviest thing in sight, a vacuum cleaner, and hurled it at the plate-glass window beside the door. The window exploded outward in a welter of glass and I plunged through the gap. I slipped and went down hard on the sidewalk, staggered to my feet, and kept running. I caromed off a parked car and then ducked around it, trying to get out of the line of fire.

Big mistake. I heard the howl of rubber on pavement, felt a massive blow on my left side, and then I was airborne. I must have been thrown very high. I seemed to be floating for a long, long time. . . .

Snowfield. White on glistening white, observed from a great height. Hills, streams . . . no, not streams. Just . . . lines. Cracks. In a tiled ceiling. My eyes slowly began to focus as I came back to myself from the upper air. I was in a bed. Not my own. Not a motel, either. It had chromed steel railings on both sides. A hospital bed. My left side was numb, chilled to the bone, as though I'd been sleeping in a snowdrift. I tried to move my head. Couldn't quite manage it.

"Hey," I said. Or something like it.

"Hey, yourself." A woman leaned over me, green smock, black face, eyes of anthracite, staring intently into mine. "I'm Dr. McGovern. How do you feel?"

"Terrible. What hospital is this?"

"Samaritan," she said brusquely. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Axton," I said. "R. B."

"Arby?" She frowned, shining a penlight into my pupils. "How do you spell that?"

"You don't, ma'am, they're just . . . initials. R period, B period. It's southern."

"Do you know where you are now?"

"Samaritan Hospital in Detroit, right?"

"Very good, R. B. You've been unconscious for roughly two

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hours. Your left arm is broken, simple fracture, and your left side is thoroughly contused. Do you know what happened to you?"

The door opened. A guy stuck his head in. "Are we awake?"

"More or less," the doctor said. "We're also lucid, more or less."

"Glad to hear it," the guy said, moving to the side of the bed. He was tall, six-four at least, wearing a blue suit, J. C. Penney off-the-rack. Dark hair, dark complexion, hawk nose. "My name's Dan Segretti, Mr. Axton," he said, flashing me his ID. "I'm a lieutenant with the Dearborn police. Do you feel up to some conversation?"

"I'd rather listen than talk. What happened?"

"You were struck by a vehicle. A Sears delivery van, to be exact. He said you ran in front of him. After you jumped through a window."

"Yeah," I said slowly, remembering. "From the pawnshop. There was a shooting—"

"Hold on, Mr. Axton. Before you say any more I'd better Mirandize you. It's strictly routine, nothing to worry about." He took out a small Sony tape recorder, placed it on the stand beside the bed, and switched it on.

Nothing to worry about. Right. So why was I sweating? I desperately tried to gather my wits while he read me my rights from a business card.

"Do you understand these rights I have explained to you?"

"Yes." Damn straight I understood them. I also understood police don't read them to a victim. Only to a suspect.

"Would you like to have an attorney present during questioning, Mr. Axton?"

"No need," I said. "What do you want to know?"

"About the pawnshop. Can you tell me what happened?"

"I was . . . looking at guitars, talking to the clerk. Is he dead? The clerk?"

"Go on, please," he said. "You were talking to the clerk?"

"Right. A guy came in, dark coat, some kind of a hat, fisherman's cap maybe. I was kneeling, looking at a guitar case. I heard a noise, like a pistol being racked. Heard it twice. He must have shot them with some kind of a silencer."

"We recovered a gun at the scene with a silencer on it," Segretti admitted. "How did you know it had one, Mr. Axton?"

"Look, let's not jerk each other around, Segretti. I'm in the trade. I know about silencers. I assume you checked my identification and found my private investigator's license."

"I also found a license to carry a concealed weapon. Do you own a weapon, Mr. Axton?"

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"Two handguns, both back at my apartment. I don't generally go armed. I wasn't armed today."

"But you were at the shop on business, weren't you? Not just to look at guitars."

I hesitated, unsure of how much I should tell him. "It was business, but it was nothing heavy. Mr. Chehab owes one of my clients some money. I was there to arrange payment."

"To collect, you mean?"

"Not to collect, just to make arrangements."

"What kind of arrangements?"

"That would be between my client and Mr. Chehab."

"We'll let that pass for now. So what happened? Did Chehab refuse to pay?"

"I never spoke with him. He was with a customer when I went in, some junkie trying to hock a radio. I think the junkie left as the other guy came in."

"Any chance the junkie did the shooting?"

"No. He was five-ten or so, grubby tan trench coat, jeans, brown hair, shoulder length. Didn't see his face, his back was to me. The other guy was taller, at least six feet, heavier set, and wearing dark clothing."

"You didn't see his face either?"

"I barely saw him at all. Just his reflection in the security mirror in the back of the store when he came for me."

"Think you could identify him?" Segretti asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. It all came down so fast. Why? Do you have somebody in mind?"

"Possibly," he said, reaching into his coat. He fished out a packet of photographs and spread them out on my lap. "Anybody look familiar?"

I scanned them. Generic faces. Cop pyschology 101. "No," I said. "Definitely not."

"You seem very sure."

"I'm sure he's not one of these guys. They're all cops, or supreme court justices or something. If I identify one of them as the shooter you'll know I'm lying. But I'm not. And I thought we weren't going to jerk each other around."

"It's a little late for that," he said evenly. "You're already jerking me around, Ax. That's what people call you, isn't it? Ax? I made a few calls while you were snoozin', had a nice chat about you with friends on the Motown force. They say your private heat license is a joke. You don't investigate doodly. You only keep the license so

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you can carry iron legally. They tell me you mostly do collections or body snatch for bail bondsmen. Is that a fair description?"

I didn't bother to answer.

"Okay, as you said, we're both in the trade, so let's make this simple. You went to see Solly Chehab to collect some money. Solly's no boy scout so you went armed. Only Solly won't pay. Instead he pulls a piece and you have to kill him, purely in self-defense. The clerk comes busting in and you take him out too, on sheer reflex. Tough break, but perfectly understandable under the circumstances. Is that how it was?"

"Not even close." I sighed. "You left out the shooter, the guy in the dark coat."

"A crowd gathered after you got clobbered by that van," he observed. "No one saw anyone else come out of the shop."

"So maybe he made a less dramatic exit. The place must have a back door. Look, you said you checked on me. Did anybody tell you I was brain dead? If I'd bothered to use a silencer, why would I smash out the front window?"

"To get away from Chehab. We found him with a gun in his hand. He pulled it, you fired to protect yourself and ran."

"I didn't shoot anybody. I was unarmed. Give me a paraffin test. It'll prove I haven't fired a weapon recently."

"It would only prove you wore rubber gloves. We found a pair at the scene. Of course you wouldn't know anything about that."

"All I know is, I went to see Solly Chehab on business and somebody took him out. It had nothing to do with me, or with the clerk, probably. He told me it was his day off."

"A coincidence? Is that what you're telling me?"

"I'm telling you all I know, or trying to. The shooter had two guns, one in each hand, both silenced. One was a nine millimeter, I think. The other one was smaller, nickel plated."

"You're very observant."

"He was coming my way. I paid attention."

"Packing two guns? C'mon, people only do that in bad movies."

"Maybe he's a big Stallone fan," I said, exasperated. "Why don't you find him and ask him?"

"Maybe I am asking him," he said evenly. "The nickel-plated weapon sounds like the one we found in Solly's hand. It was definitely his gun, his wife already identified it. Of course, there was no silencer on it. But you couldn't know that, since you claim you never talked to him."

"I didn't talk to him and I'm through talking to you. I'm tired

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and I ache and you're not listening. Are you going to charge me with anything?"

He stared at me for the better part of a year before he finally shook his head. "No, you're free for now, but don't plan any long trips."

"My only plan is to get some sleep as soon as you're gone. I've had a rough day."

"Sweet dreams," he said with a shrug. "One thing, though, Axton. Whether you were there to collect or only to arrange for payment, Solly Chehab was a rough customer. How did you figure on getting the money? Muscle?"

"Muscle a guy who owns a shop full of guns? Not likely."

"How then?"

"Sometimes people run up tabs they'd rather forget about," I said. "I get paid to remind 'em that paying your debts is the right thing to do. The honorable thing."

"So you just talk to 'em? Maybe threaten 'em a little?"

"I never threaten. That would be extortion. And I usually don't talk all that much. You see these scars on my face, Segretti? I took a header off a motorcycle a few years ago. My face took nearly a year to heal. I didn't have the money for plastic surgery then, and I'm not sure I'd get fixed now even if I could afford it."

"Why not?"

"I've got a money face. When people look at me it reminds 'em how . . . uncertain life can be. If they owe somebody, they usually decide to pay up. I don't threaten them. I don't have to."

"A money face?" He nodded, smiling. "Interesting idea. I'll admit, if you asked me for some cash, I might fork it over. Or maybe I'd get so scared I'd pull a gun. What would you do then?"

"If the door was locked, I guess I'd have to dive through a window. Does that cover everything?"

"For now," he said, rising. He looked me over carefully, as if measuring me for leg irons and a cell. "We'll talk again, Axton. Count on it."

The Porkpie Hat is a blues bar on the wrong side of Montcalm Avenue in Detroit. It was an A&P supermarket once. The display windows have been replaced with plywood, but other than that, Willis Tyrone hasn't spent a dime to camouflage its origins. A crude glass-brick bar anchors one corner of the huge room. The seating consists of barn-board booths against the walls and Salvation Army dinettes on the main floor. The dance floor's bare con-

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crete, and the bandstand's made of rough planks laid across wooden crates. The joint has atmosphere you can cut with a knife and a clientele to match. It was empty now, though, except for a single booth in the far corner in the shadows near the stage. It seemed like a very long walk.

Willis Tyrone nearly filled the booth, a barrel-shaped dark Buddha with a shaved head the size of a football helmet. He was wearing a custom-tailored three-piece suit, a pale lavender shirt with a Rush Limbaugh tie. He wasn't alone. A stiletto-slender gangbanger named Lacey shared the booth with him. Lacey's suit was a bold caramel, a perfect match for his complexion. His white silk shirt was collarless and he was wearing dark glasses. He's a dangerous man, or so I've heard.

"For a guy who spent the night in the hospital, you don't look so bad," Willis observed. "What happened?"

"Somebody whacked Solly Chehab and a clerk," I said. I pulled a chair up to the booth with my good arm and eased down on it. "The guy was a pro. Used a silencer, took 'em both down in just a few seconds. I left through a window, got hit by a truck."

"Looks like it hurts," Lacey said, with a faint smile.

"It's the least of my problems," I said. "I've got police trouble, Mr. Tyrone. They think I'm involved. I kept your name out of it, but you'd better talk to me. What's up here?"

"I don't know," Willis said slowly. "Truly. But something must be. What did Chehab say?"

"I didn't get the chance to talk to him. You said he was in to you for a hundred and sixty grand. Didn't look to me like he could raise that much if he sold his heart and lungs for transplants. How'd he get in so deep?"

"Five card stud," Tyrone said simply. "Man thought he was a player. He wasn't."

"Wait a minute, you're saying you let this guy run up a tab and then took his marker for a hundred and sixty large knowin' he couldn't pay? Am I missing something here? You know damned well gambling debts aren't collectible in Michigan."

"It wasn't about money," Willis said coolly. "Johnno Habash was in the game too. Johnno and me, we been havin' some . . . business problems, crowdin' each other's operations in Pontiac and Saginaw. He ran into Solly in the club and invited him to sit in. I think he was testin' me, to see how I'd handle this dude. So I took everything Solly had and then some. And I woulda collected every damn dime. I wanted Johnno to drive by Solly's shop and see my

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name on it. And remember what happened to his pal when he came up against me."

"I see," I said slowly. "So Solly was just a bone you two were fighting over. He didn't really matter, did he?"

"He shouldn't have dealt himself into that game. Considerin' his marker wasn't much good, I went easy on him. I sent you to talk to him instead of Lacey here. I gave him a chance to do the right thing. I know you don't do no strong-arm work."

"Yeah, well, the Dearborn cops don't know it. I'm there, the guy gets whacked, guess who they like for it? And now that I've heard your side of it, I doubt what happened was a coincidence. Somebody's trying to set you up."

"Me?" Willis echoed, surprised.

"I was working for you. If they nail me for this, eventually they'll tie you to it."

"What makes you think it wasn't Chehab they wanted?" Lacey put in. "He's the one they got."

"The place was almost empty," I countered. "They could have waited to take him when he was alone. The shooter was a pro. He knew exactly what he was doing. Are the business problems you're into with Johnno Habash serious enough that he might try to jam you up?"

"He's Lebanese," Willis said thoughtfully. "Got an intricate mind. Could be he'd come at me this way. Maybe you better look into this, Axton. I'll pick up the tab. Double your usual rate. But Ax? You keep me clear of it, hear? I don't need no police in my business. Take Lacey along. He can drive for you and handle any problems that come up. Wouldn't want nobody to take advantage of your lame wing. Maybe you can give him a few pointers. Show him how to handle people without bustin' 'em up."

"I'd rather manage on my own," I said, rising.

"I know that," Willis said evenly. "Take Lacey anyway."

"Where to?" Lacey asked. We were in his car, a Caddy Seville four door, loaded, black, with a black leather interior.

"Pontiac," I said. "Habash has an antique shop there, runs a book out of the back."

"And?" Lacey asked. "You figure we just gonna walk in, ask Mr. Habash if he's tryin' to do Willis in?"

"Something like that," I said.

"Terrific," he said, glancing in the mirror. "Well, at least we won't be up against him alone. We got a tail."

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I reached up and shifted the rearview mirror. "Where?"

"Blue BMW. Tucked in behind that gas truck. He's been with us since we left the club. Cops?"

"I don't think so," I said. "They'd use more than one car. Maybe Habash. Hell, maybe even Willis, covering his bets. Either way, we don't want to lead a parade to Habash's place. Can you lose him?"

"No problem." Lacey matted the pedal and the Seville surged ahead like a jet taking off. He darted in and out of traffic for a lightning-quick five miles, then ducked in front of a Greyhound and zipped off the freeway. We did a scenic tour of Bloomfield Hills for fifteen minutes, turning off and doubling back, before Lacey gradually worked his way to the outskirts of Pontiac using streets I didn't even know existed. I was impressed. I was also hurting. The painkillers I'd gulped at Samaritan this morning were wearing off. I felt like a doberman was gnawing on my arm.

I gave Lacey directions and he found Habash's Pontiac store with no trouble. Antiques Incroyables was a garishly painted fortress that occupied most of a city block just off University Drive north of the Silverdome. Its ground-floor display windows were barred with decorative grillwork that guarded a haphazard stock of antiques: Edwardian furniture, art deco radios, a half-dozen Starck Victrolas, a rack of Civil War Springfield rifles.

"Don't look like much," Lacey observed, easing the Seville to the curb.

"He's got four more shops like this one, two in Flint, one in Saginaw, and one up in Traverse City. The antiques are real."

"Never could see the sense of buyin' old stuff," Lacey said. "I was raised up around old stuff. New is better. How do we work this?"

"We don't," I said, climbing stiffly out of the car. "It'll work us. Just be cool, okay?"

Lacey arched an eyebrow, but said nothing. As we entered the store, I paused in front of a large gilt-framed mirror, waved to my reflection, then circled around a beautifully detailed Chinese boudoir screen and waited. A door behind the screen opened and a giant stepped out. He was six-eight and three-hundred-plus pounds, with no noticeable flab. He was wearing a stark black suit with a gold Fruit of Islam scimitar pin on the lapel, a black silk skullcap, and a white shirt with a red bowtie. And he held a stubby Winchester automatic shotgun cradled in his massive arms.

"Axton," he said softly. "How you been?"

"I've been better, Mr. Bass. Yourself?"

"I'll do. This a social call?"

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"Nope. I was in a dustup yesterday in Dearborn. A guy named Solly Chehab was involved. You know him?"

"Met him," Bass acknowledged, looking Lacey up and down. "Johnno does business with him. What about him?"

"He's dead," I said simply. "Him and a clerk. Your boss and Willis Tyrone are havin' a little pushing match. Maybe the killing's connected to it. Maybe it was Johnno that I saw in the store. He's not a trusting man. It's the kind of thing he'd handle himself."

"He didn't," Bass said positively. "Johnno was here takin' action all day yesterday."

"Whose action did he take around eleven yesterday morning?"

Bass considered the question. I could almost see the clockwork behind his dark eyes, mulling the pluses and minuses of telling me the truth, lying, or making us disappear permanently. Bass is an intelligent man. I was counting on that. A lot.

"You know a cracker named Rusty Robichard?" Bass asked abruptly. "Owns a used-car lot over on Kercheval?"

"I know him."

"He had the Vikings and seven against the 'Niners Sunday. Five dimes. He came in about noon, paid Johnno personally, took Green Bay and thirteen over the Lions. You can check with him. But Ax? If I have any law trouble over this, you better see how deep a hole you can dig with one arm. We understand each other?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Bass. Absolutely."

"Do you believe him?" Willis Tyrone asked. We were in his office at the rear of the Porkpie Hat.

"Robichard backed his story," I said. "We checked."

"You gotta be kiddin'," Lacey snorted. "A used-car salesman? He'd sell his mama for a dollar bet and toss in new seatcovers."

"That's why I believe him," I said mildly. "If Habash was involved, he would have covered himself better. He had time enough, and he can certainly afford it."

"Seems reasonable," Willis said, gazing at me over the blunt bridge of his fingertips.

"If Habash didn't set it up, then maybe Ax is makin' it too complicated," Lacey countered. "Solly ran a pawnshop. Maybe he stiffed the wrong guy. Or maybe the clerk was the target. Ballin' somebody's old lady or something."

"And I just happened to be there?" I asked. "Coincidences happen, but I don't like the odds much."

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"If we're talking odds," Willis said, "then we're looking in the wrong direction. I read someplace that most homicides are domestic. So? Did Solly have a wife?"

"Apparently," I said. "The cop said she ID'd his gun. But if we bop around the neighborhood asking questions with a murder investigation going on, we'll end up in a local slammer."

"Not if you know the right people," Willis said. "How are you fixed for life insurance, Ax?"

"I'm not," I said warily.

"Good. I know a guy runs an agency in Dearborn. His name's Emile Salam. Lebanese. We do business together sometimes. If there's any dirt on Chehab, Emile will know about it or know who to ask without makin' waves. I'll call, tell him you're coming."

"He's baa-ack," Lacey said quietly. We were in his Seville on Michigan Avenue, headed for Dearborn. "The BMW picked us up again at the club."

"Definitely not a cop, then," I said. "They would have changed cars. Anybody mad at you, Lacey?"

"Lotsa people," he said coolly. "But I don't know this dude. How about you?"

I tilted the mirror and picked up the BMW loafing along in our wake a few blocks back. "Dudes," I said thoughtfully. "He's got a passenger. In the backseat. And he's comin' on. You'd better—"

My warning was unnecessary. Lacey'd already matted the pedal, gunning the Seville from thirty to seventy in a couple of blocks. He cranked the wheel hard right, powersliding around a corner, then jammed the brakes at midblock and pulled into an alley. We both swiveled in our seats, staring out the rear window as the BMW blew past a few moments later.

"You know either one of 'em?" Lacey said, threading the Seville down the alley to the next street.

"Never saw them before," I said, "but the guy in the backseat had a piece."

"A Mac 10 machine pistol," Lacey said. "Definitely not cops. The driver didn't look old enough to vote."

"I vote we get the hell out of here before they come back," I said. "Maybe some life insurance wouldn't be a bad idea at that."

Salam's Federated Agency was in a small strip shopping mall off west Carlisle in Dearborn, squeezed in between a Radio Shack and a Sav-Mor drugstore. The other mall businesses were mom-and-pop shops, a dry cleaners, a queen-size clothing store. The

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only hint that you weren't on Main Street, USA, was that the shops all had placards in the windows written in Arabic. Dearborn has more citizens of Lebanese descent than Beirut. It was after seven when we arrived, and most of the shops were closed. The drapes were drawn at the Salam Agency windows too, but the door opened as we approached.

"Gentlemen, I'm Emile Salam. Follow me, please."

He was fiftyish, six foot or so, two hundred sleek pounds encased in a precisely tailored pearl-gray suit and alligator shoes. His face was sunlamp tan, with prominent features topped by a razor-cut silver mane. He led us to a rear office, a comfortable room dominated by a massive desk of dark oak, faced by fashionably worn leather chairs. It was a man's room, a room for cigars and brandy and talk of investments. The paintings on the walls were originals, and the antique Assyrian head on his desk looked authentic. I don't know much about art, but I guessed that head was worth more than my car, apartment, savings, and probably my soul.

"Be comfortable, please," Salam said as he eased into the executive swivel chair behind his desk. "Willis said you'd be dropping by, but he wasn't forthcoming about why. What is it you wish of me?"

"Do you know Mr. Tyrone well?" I asked, gingerly lowering myself into one of the leather chairs. My arm was throbbing fiercely and the rest of me ached like I'd been rammed by a Sears delivery truck.

"Willis and I go back many years," Salam said, smiling. "To my wilder days, you might say. We're old friends, and we have substantial business interests in common. I'm aware of the . . . colorful nature of some of Willis's enterprises. You may speak freely with me."

"A man was killed yesterday, a pawnbroker named Solly Chehab," I said. "Do you know him?"

"I know most of the merchants in the area, one way and another," he said, nodding.

"Did he have enemies? Anyone with a reason to take him out?"

"Possibly. He was a relatively recent immigrant, came here from the north of Lebanon ten years ago or so. He was a crude man, not noted for his social grace, and pawnshops are a thankless trade. He probably had any number of enemies."

"We need a name, Mr. Salam," I pressed. "What about his family? Any problems there?"

"He hasn't much family left," Salam said. "He was the last son.

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One brother was killed in the '67 war, another died a few years ago in the *intifada*. Only his mother remains. And his new wife, of course."

"New wife?"

Salam nodded. "He arranged for a marriage earlier this year. He brought a Lebanese girl from a village near his own."

"Arranged?" Lacey put in. "You mean he didn't know her?"

"They exchanged photographs and spoke on the phone," Salam said with a shrug. "The match was acceptable to both parties. It's not an uncommon practice in our part of the world. My own wife, God rest her, came to me that way. It may seem a bit . . . businesslike to you, but our divorce rate is substantially lower than the national average."

"His wife's not a candidate, then?"

"Hardly," he said, smiling. "She's been here less than a year and barely speaks English, but now that you mention it, there were problems in the marriage, or so I heard."

"What kind of problems?"

"The usual. Money. Mrs. Chehab is younger than her husband and unfamiliar with the ways of this country. It's said he exaggerated his assets when their marriage was arranged. She thought him wealthy, and by Lebanese standards perhaps he was. But not by American standards. Apparently she has complained, and I understand that Soliman . . . rebuked her. Physically. In public."

"He slapped her around, you mean?" Lacey asked.

"As I said—" Salam nodded—"a man without grace. Tell me, why is Willis interested in the death of this man?"

"Solly Chehab owed Willis a lot of money," I said. "He sent me to arrange for payment. I was in the shop when it happened."

"Axton," he said, leaning back, eyeing me thoughtfully. "Willis mentioned your name but I couldn't place it. You're a man with problems, Mr. Axton. Now I understand why Willis asked me to see you."

"I'm not sure I do. What can you do?"

"That depends. Did you kill Soliman Chehab?" His question was almost casual.

"No," I said. "A guy came in off the street and took them both out. A professional."

"You saw him?"

"For a moment. I doubt that I could identify him."

"Then perhaps I can help," he said. "Excuse me a moment." He rose, stepped into a small inner office, and returned a few minutes

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later with a photograph. He slid it across the desk to me. "Could this be the man you saw?"

I picked up the photo. It was three by five, with uneven edges, as though it had been cut from a larger shot. The pic was taken on a beach with the ocean in the background. The face was a bit blurry, but it was very familiar. I held it up for Lacey and he nodded.

"Mr. BMW," he said.

Salam glanced the question at me.

"He's been tailing us," I explained, examining the photograph more closely.

"No doubt looking to finish the job. I take it he was the man in the shop?" Salam asked.

"I don't know. Who is he?"

"He is Fouad Nachleh, Najwa's brother."

"Who's Najwa?"

"Sorry. Mrs. Chehab's name is Najwa. Fouad came with her from Lebanon as part of the arrangement. He was very active in the unrest there and desperately needed to get out of the country. A marriage seemed the simplest way."

"So this what'shisname, Fouad, has only been in the country a few months?"

"There's no shame in being an immigrant, even one on the run. I came here under similar circumstances myself thirty years ago."

"You've lost me," I said. "If Chehab helped Fouad get out of Lebanon, why would he kill him?"

"A matter of pride," Salam said simply. "The Nachlehs are an old and honored family in Lebanon who lost much in the war and more in the peace. Sol Chehab was a . . . shopkeeper. If Fouad had not been in danger, his sister would never have married Solly. And for a man like Soliman to abuse Najwa . . . well. One can imagine how Fouad must have felt. So, Mr. Axton, does the picture look more familiar to you now? Was Fouad the man you saw?"

"Possibly," I said, nodding. "He could have been."

Salam's charm faded a few watts. "Mr. Axton, Willis sent you to me because he needed my help. But I'm not just a disinterested bystander here. As I said, Willis and I share substantial business interests in this community. Neither of us wants the police nosing around for months when the matter could be easily put to rest. Willis might even decide to . . . sacrifice someone in order to close the incident. Do you take my meaning?"

"Loud and clear," I said, rising. "I'll keep the picture. I've got a lousy memory for faces."

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"As you wish." Salam rose as well. "But please be discreet. My business relationship with Willis isn't common knowledge. I'd prefer to keep it that way."

"I understand," I said, slipping the picture into my jacket. "Thanks for everything." He ushered us out of the office, but as we started for the door, I froze. "Hold it," I hissed, waving them back.

"What's up?" Lacey whispered.

"Better stay where you are, Mr. Salam," I said quietly. "Come on, Lacey." We moved quietly toward the front window. I swept the curtain aside and stared out into the night.

"What's up?" Lacey said. "I don't see squat."

"My mistake," I said sheepishly. "Thought I heard something. Mr. Salam, could you let us out, please?"

"Of course," Salam said, striding briskly to the front door. "You seem a little jumpy, Mr. Axton."

"I've had a rough couple of days," I said, eyeing the empty parking lot. "I think I'd better head for a safe place. Like a police station maybe. To tell them how much my memory's improved."

"An excellent idea," Salam agreed.

"I just hope Willis thinks so," Lacey said, with a smile that never reached his eyes.

"Where to?" Lacey asked, as we pulled out of the mall parking lot. "The Dearborn cop shop?"

"No, I want to make one more stop first. 2316 Tomahawk Court. It's a trailer park, just over the county line in Westland."

"What is it?"

"Solly Chehab's place. I want to make a condolence call on his widow. What was her name? Najwa?"

"Are you nuts? Her brother's huntin' us, Ax. Salam gave you an out and you'd best take it, my man, if not for yourself then for Willis. He wants clear of this thing and I'm not much interested in gettin' my head blown off so you can make nice with some deadbeat's widow."

"You think I should go to the police? And tell them what?"

"That your memory cleared up, that's what. Identify the shooter."

"Identify him how? Give 'em a description? Medium height, olive complexion, possibly Lebanese? That'd narrow it down to about fifty thousand guys. Look, when Willis sent you along, he said I should give you a few pointers. Okay, here's one: If you talk to

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cops, keep it simple. Don't leave loose ends. And the bottom line is, they won't be able to find Fouad from a description."

"So what? So tell 'em his name."

"Wrong. I've already told 'em I'd never seen Chehab until yesterday and never spoke to him. If I suddenly give them his brother-in-law's name, they'll want to know where I got it, and I can't tell them that without involving Salam and Willis."

Lacey started to say something, then paused. "Ah. I see what you mean. Okay, so maybe your story needs work. What good is seein' the widow gonna do?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I've got the feeling I'm being jerked around here, by Salam, or Habash, or even Willis. Maybe all three of 'em, for all I know."

"You think Willis would do you like that?"

"I think Willis is complicated. He let Chehab bet a hundred and sixty grand he didn't have just to make a point. Would you do that?"

"I can't afford to," Lacey said easily. "Willis can. Maybe you been on the street too long, Ax. You gettin' paranoid, man."

"Good," I said. "In our line of work, paranoids live longer."

"Or maybe it just seems like it," Lacey said.

The address was a double-wide trailer, one of an army of similar units bivouacked in a low-rent subdivision. The only variations were color and the shape of their shutters. The Chehab box was a faded beige with a redwood deck for a porch. I tapped the buzzer and a squat, squared-off woman answered the door. She was sixtyish, wearing a shapeless black shift, not a true chador but not far from it. Her dull gray hair was pulled back in a taut bun. Her eyes were red from crying but there was steel in them now.

"My name's Axton, ma'am," I said, holding up my ID. "Is Mrs. Chehab in?"

"I am Mrs. Chehab. What do you want?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am. Mr. Emile Salam asked us to see you. We only need a few minutes."

Hearing Salam's name seemed to relax her a bit. "You will want my son's wife. Come in." She motioned us into the tiny living room area. It was nicer than I expected, beige carpet, dark green furniture, low, in the Mediterranean style. Everything was neat and impeccably clean.

"Sit, please, be comfortable. Will you have coffee?"

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"No, thank you, ma'am. We just have a few questions for Mrs. Chehab."

The woman settled onto the sofa, facing us. She hadn't really looked at my ID, which was just as well. She called out something in Arabic. "You speak Arabic?" she asked.

"No, ma'am."

"No matter. My English is good. Najwa, my son's wife, has little English. Mr. Salam is well?"

"Yes, ma'am, he sends his sympathies, of course." The other Mrs. Chehab drifted into the room as I was speaking, silent as a spirit. She was wearing black and her dark hair was tied back in the same bun as her mother-in-law's, but that ended the resemblance. Najwa's face and eyes were oval, with perfectly symmetrical brows. Her skin had a faint olive hue and her lips were slightly darker, though she was wearing no makeup that I could discern. Didn't need it. I think Cleopatra must have had a face like that. More than lovely. Desirable. And she was well aware of it. She glanced at Lacey and me a moment each, then pointedly took a chair in the far corner of the room beside the television set, as far from us as she could get. And away from Mrs. Chehab as well.

The older woman spoke to her briefly in Arabic. I caught the name Salam, nothing else. The girl showed no reaction. Her eyes were as intense as a caged hawk's, guarded, but not afraid.

"Please offer your daugther-in-law our sympathies," I said. "We have just a few questions. Pardon me for being blunt at such a time, but we have heard . . . rumors, that there was trouble between your son and his wife. Over money."

"There is always talk," the older woman said bitterly. "Idle hands, busy tongues. A young wife, ignorant of the ways of this country, naturally people gabble on about nothing. My son put a stop to the talk, as was his right."

There was more than a trace of satisfaction in Mrs. Chehab's tone. I couldn't tell how much of this the girl understood. Her face was no more readable than an alabaster mask. "And when your son . . . corrected your daughter-in-law, that was the end of it?"

"I don't understand," the woman said, frowning. Najwa spoke for the first time, asking a question in a rapid-fire burst of Arabic. Her mother-in-law dismissed her with a curt wave.

"What I'm asking is, was there trouble between your son and Najwa's brother, for instance?"

"Fouad?" The older woman's face softened. "What trouble could be between Fouad and my Soliman? They are like brothers. Closer

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even than man and wife. Fouad is the sons I lost brought back to me. The sons I . . . lost." She echoed the phrase, as if its meaning had struck home again. She seemed to deflate and her dark eyes brimmed as she glanced around the roomful of strangers. Najwa was eyeing me with open suspicion now.

"Do you have a photograph of Fouad?" I asked.

Mrs. Chehab gestured toward the television set without answering. I rose and stepped over to it. There were several photographs, a portrait of Solly Chehab in a polyester shirt open halfway to his navel, showing lots of chest hair and gold chains, and a fading snapshot of his parents, staring fixedly into the lens from another age, another land. The most striking shot was a wedding picture, fifty or so souls in their Sunday best gathered in celebration. Najwa didn't look all that happy, wedding or no, but Solly was wearing a Cheshire Cat smirk, arm in arm with Fouad, who was decked out in a white tux and positively beaming from the shot. Even Mrs. Chehab looked pleased, perhaps because her escort was Emile Salam, apparently standing in for the father of the bride.

Najwa glanced up at me, reading my face. If my scars bothered her, she didn't show it. "Who are you?" she asked, in strongly accented English.

"Axton," I said.

She held my gaze a moment longer, a distinctly unsettling experience. "I don't know you," she said at last. "Go away." It was not a request.

"Of course," I said. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. I know it's a bad time . . ." My voice trailed off. She wasn't listening anyway. I doubt that she understood. But I was beginning to.

"Mrs. Chehab," I asked, as the older woman ushered us out, "one last question. How did your son bring his new wife here?"

"Bring?" she echoed, puzzled. "By plane."

"No, I mean, who arranged it? Who was the marriage broker?"

She looked at me as though I was brain dead. "Your boss," she said. "Who else?"

"Thank you, ma'am," I said. "And again, we're sorry to trouble you at such a time."

"Am I missin' somethin'?" Lacey said as we climbed into his Seville. "What the hell is Willis doin' mixed up with these people?"

"Not Willis," I said. "Salam. I mentioned Salam's name when we got here to break the ice, and it did. He's in that wedding picture on the TV. Hell, he's probably in wedding pictures in half the homes around here either as a marriage broker or an insurance

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agent. Or more likely as your friendly neighborhood loan shark, which is what his real action is. You don't get the kind of leverage he's got in this town by peddling whole-life policies. . . . Or maybe you do," I said, as a thought struck me. "Goose it. We'd better get out of here."

"Why? What's up?"

"The brother-in-law, Fouad. Salam said he came here with his sister as part of the marriage deal which means he's only been in the country a matter of months."

"So?"

"So if his English is no better than his sister's, how did he know where to find us? He picked us up at the Porkpie Hat both times. When we ditched him in Pontiac, he probably went back there and sat on the place until we came back."

"Sounds logical."

"It is. The problem is that I didn't tell anybody I was going there, or even that I was connected to Willis. Whoever sent Fouad after us already knew it, and that narrows it down to a very short list."

"You mean Salam? Or maybe Habash?"

"Or maybe even Solly's wife, Najwa. Solly probably told her about the fix he was in and who was involved. Or maybe Salam was right, and Willis is looking to cut his losses and get clear of this thing before it gets any deeper."

Lacey glanced at me with mild curiosity. "Come on, do you really figure Willis is heavy enough to burn you just to turn off the heat?"

"I don't know what I think," I said at last. "I might do it myself in the right circumstances. And I'm not one of his people anyway. I just do odd jobs for him that need a certain touch."

"Or a certain face," Lacey said drily.

"That too," I conceded. "But, bottom line, no, I don't think Willis is setting me up, mostly because you're along. From what I hear, you're good at what you do. He wouldn't throw you away for nothing. Unless you're on his bad side for something I don't know about."

"I got no problems with Willis. On the other hand, could be he sent me along in case he decides to do somethin' about you. Like you said, I'm good at what I do."

"Then let's find out how good you are. I need to get to the Dearborn cop shop in one piece. But if I'm right about being set up, my guess is Fouad will have the place staked out."

"You think he's crazy enough to smoke you in front of a police station?"

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"Compared to what he saw in Lebanon, street action here probably seems pretty tame. I doubt a police station will faze him much, and he's running out of time. I think he'll take his shot."

"In that case, it's gonna be interesting." Lacey frowned, unbuttoning his jacket and loosening his piece in its shoulder holster.

"It's even more interesting than that," I said. "I don't want any shooting."

"What you talkin' about?" Lacey snapped. "Them boys are packin' a Mac, probably full auto with a fifty-round clip. They can turn my wheels into scrap and us along with it in two seconds flat. And you're tellin' me I ain't supposed to shoot back? Why don't we just shoot ourselves right here and save the drive?"

"Look, I know I'm asking a lot, but it has to be this way. To get clear of this thing I need Fouad in one piece. You're supposed to be a hotshot bodyguard. So prove it."

"Ain't no driver in the world can outrun bullets, man. I'd drop you off a block from City Hall and let you dogtrot the rest of the way if Willis hadn't told me to keep you in one piece. How much money you got on you?"

"I don't know, a couple hundred, I guess. Why?"

"Give it up," he said, holding out his hand, palm upward. "All of it."

I hesitated, then handed over my wallet. He riffled through it, extracted the bills, and tossed the wallet back. "Hundred and a half," he sighed, digging out his own wallet. "Man, you'd best make this up to me or it's comin' out your hide, you dig?" He picked up speed, threading his way through traffic until we overtook a taxicab. Lacey pulled alongside and rolled his window down. "Yo, brother," he called. "Pull over, man, I got a fare for you."

The driver eyed him suspiciously, then pulled over to the curb, pointedly parking under a streetlight. Lacey climbed out, trotted up to the cab and had a brief conversation with the cabbie. I couldn't hear them, but I saw Lacey flash my money, then add several bills of his own. When he trotted back to the Seville, Lacey was wearing the driver's grimy slouch hat.

"C'mon, man, I just rented us some wheels. And don't say one damn word about this lid or you'll need a cast for both arms."

I followed him to the cab. He and the driver exchanged car keys. "You get in back on the floor," Lacey said as he slid behind the wheel. "Nobody's gonna recognize me in this hat, but with that arm in a sling and that face of yours, you kinda stand out, you know? Let's go."

The mats on the cab floor reeked of every stench I could imagine

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and some I didn't dare guess at. Crouched in the dark, I couldn't follow our progress until Lacey turned onto Michigan Avenue a half-dozen blocks from City Hall and Dearborn police headquarters. The cab's shortwave radio sputtered and Lacey switched it off. "There they be," he said quietly. "Blue BMW, a block this side of the cop shop, motor runnin'. They checkin' me out pretty good . . . but they ain't makin' no moves. Yet. When I pull over, stay put until I tell you, okay? Let 'em think I'm waitin' for a fare 'stead of droppin' one off."

He eased the cab to the curb, parked, and then relaxed, draping his right arm across the passenger seat, tapping his fingers to a silent rhythm, not a care in the world. "Damn, they still eyeballin' us and you gotta cover some distance to the door. . . ." He tapped the horn, three impatient blasts. Then three more. Then he just leaned on it. The blare was deafening.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled over the din.

"My favorite hobby," he said. "Tickin' off Detroit pigs."

"We're in Dearborn," I said.

"Whatever. Get ready to go, we got company."

"What's the trouble here, sport?" A Dearborn cop was at Lacey's window.

"Got me a problem fare, officer," Lacey said, jerking his thumb in my direction as I got to my knees and backed out of the door, keeping low. "You'd better take him in. He says he was mixed up in some kinda murder yesterday."

The cop had me by the arm before I'd covered five feet. And for once, I didn't mind being collared. Not even a little.

"Let me get this straight," Lieutenant Segretti said. "Yesterday you couldn't even describe the shooter, but now you can identify him? I know hindsight's supposed to be twenty-twenty, Axton, but that's stretching it." We were in his office, a windowless, Spartan cubicle with a file cabinet, two desks, and four chairs, all of them the same institutional gray as the concrete walls.

"I've learned a few things today," I said. "And added up a few more. For openers, when I showed at the shop yesterday, Solly wasn't worried. A little edgy maybe, but not really nervous."

"Maybe you're not as scary as you think you are."

"Sure I am," I said evenly. "It's what I do. Like being a cop is what you do. And even if he wasn't afraid of me, he should have been afraid of my client."

"Ah yes, your famous nameless client."

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"My client is Willis Tyrone," I said.

"Tyrone?" he said, straightening. "The mobster?"

"The businessman," I countered. "Solly owed him a hundred and sixty grand. A gambling debt, which we both know isn't legally collectible. My job was to persuade Solly to do the right thing."

"Muscle him, you mean."

"Nope, that would be extortion. I was just there to talk."

"We'll let that pass for now," he said with a shrug. "Yesterday you withheld your client's name. Why tell me now?"

"Because I want you to understand I had no reason to kill Solly Chehab. He owed Willis big and dead men can't pay. I was only there to work something out between Chehab and Willis."

"All right." Segretti nodded. "Let's say I buy your story so far. If I owed Willis Tyrone a hundred and sixty large, I'd definitely be worried. But you say Chehab wasn't? Why was that?"

"Because he thought help was coming. I think he called Emile Salam right after the game and told him what happened."

"Salam? You're claiming he's involved in this?"

"Just bear with me. If you're in a financial jam that you can't take to a bank, who do you call in this town? Especially if you're Lebanese?"

"Emile Salam," Segretti admitted. "Or someone like him."

"It was Salam. There's a family connection. So Salam tells him not to worry, that he knows Willis, which is true, and that he'll take care of everything. Which, in a way, is what he did."

"But what's in it for Salam? It wasn't his money."

"This wasn't about money," I said quietly. "You said Mrs. Chehab identified the gun Solly was holding. Said it was his, right? Have you met the lady?"

He nodded. "When she identified the piece. She's . . . a very handsome woman."

"That she is. And Salam's a man with an eye for beauty. I think he's obsessed with her."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because when I showed up at his office looking for a lead, he gave me this." I took out the picture of Fouad and slid it across his desk. "His name is Fouad Nachleh. He's Mrs. Chehab's brother."

"I can see the resemblance. So?"

"So if you check the edges, you'll see it was trimmed from an enlargement of a snapshot taken in Lebanon, judging from the background. Salam got it out of an inner office. He had it right at

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hand. But this is only half of the shot. Whose face is in the half he kept, do you think?"

He eyed the photo, thinking it over. "Too thin," he said at last. "You said yourself she's a looker. So he has a picture of her. That might mean he's got a thing for her. It doesn't prove he killed her husband."

"Not him," I said. "Them. She helped him."

"Helped him how? You said the shooter was alone."

"Solly's gun," I said simply. "It keeps coming back to that. You said you found a gun in his hand, right? But it didn't belong there. This thing happened in a matter of seconds. Solly had no time to pull a gun, and he had no reason to pull one on Salam anyway. Salam was his sugar daddy."

"But we found him with a gun in his hand."

"Because Salam put it there. What you said about the two guns being like a B movie was true. The shooter was a pro, and even if a pro carried two guns, they'd be the same caliber. Otherwise he'd have to carry two different kinds of ammo. And why would he leave one gun behind and not the other? It finally dawned on me that he didn't. He left them both. Salam didn't want an investigation, he wanted this thing settled. He meant to pop Solly with one gun and me with the other, then leave both guns behind, one on each of us, as though we'd killed each other. You'd check me out, find out I work for Willis Tyrone and that Chehab owed him money. End of story, right? A collection that went wrong."

"You said this morning both guns had silencers. The one we found on Solly didn't have one."

"Not when you found it. But if you check the barrel, you should find scratches where one was pulled off. It was crude, like a lawnmower muffler or something. Salam needed to keep from attracting attention but he couldn't leave a silencer on Solly's gun. Solly wouldn't have needed one to defend himself in his own place."

"You seem to know a lot about a gun you supposedly only saw once in a security mirror."

"I'm not the only one who knows about it. Solly's wife is the one who claimed it was his, right?"

"That's what she said. I suppose she could have made a mistake."

"Did she sound like she made a mistake? I'll bet she was dead certain about it."

"You'd win that one," Segretti admitted. "She swore to it. But that doesn't make you right about the rest of it. How do you think it came down?"

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"Something like this: There was already trouble in the marriage. Solly misled his wife about what a big shot he was and he probably got into the game with Willis trying for a big score. He got cleaned out instead. So he called Salam, hoping for a bailout. Salam says don't worry, I'll handle everything. Then he gets hold of Solly's wife and tells her Solly's gambled away every cent he had. The lady didn't like being middle class, how do you think she'd feel about being flat broke?

"But Salam's got a solution. All she has to do is identify the second gun as Solly's and all her troubles will be history. Maybe he promised to take care of her forever after or maybe he saved that part for later, when she'd realize she's not only in his debt, she's also his accomplice."

"It seems logical as far as it goes," Segretti mused. "But it's got a major hole in it. It's all theory. None of the evidence is conclusive."

"It will be," I said. "All you have to do is show Najwa that picture of her brother and tell her the truth: that Salam tried to save himself by sending Fouad after me, and later by implicating him in Solly's murder. She'll roll on Salam in a heartbeat."

"You seem awfully sure of that."

"She's got a track record," I said. "She married Solly to save her brother and get him out of Lebanon. She'll give you Salam for the same reason."

"I don't know," he said doubtfully. "It's still thin. Salam's a respected member of the community and Solly's wife barely speaks English. If it comes down to her word against his . . ."

"Not just her word," I said. "Mine too. Emile Salam's the man I saw in the pawnshop this morning."

"When we talked before, you said you couldn't identify the shooter."

"I was still shaky then. I got hit by a truck, remember? My memory's clearer now."

"You also said you only saw his reflection in a security mirror."

"That's right," I conceded. "But earlier tonight I saw Salam's reflection in his office window."

"You're saying you recognized his reflection?"

"His reflection was what I saw this morning. It was the same man. I'll swear to it."

"Will you?" Segretti said. "If you're that certain, then you won't mind taking a lie detector test, right?"

"Not a chance," I said evenly. "I don't believe in polygraphs. It's a religious thing with me."

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Segretti snorted.

"In any case, I won't have to take one. The lady's testimony will bury Salam. You only need mine to confirm hers. So why don't you ask her?"

"Maybe I will," he said, rising. "I wouldn't mind visiting her again, anyway. But if you're wrong about her, you've dug yourself a very deep hole, my friend, by knowing so much about that gun."

"I'll take that chance," I said.

"Damned right you will," he said with an icy smile. "It's not like you have any choice. Wait here. I'll leave instructions at the desk about you, so don't try to leave. One way or another, this shouldn't take long."

And it didn't, thank God. Though, in a way, I was almost sorry. I think a small part of me hoped that I was wrong, that either Najwa wasn't involved or would stand behind the man who'd risked everything for her. But she didn't. She stood by her brother instead. Segretti said he showed her the picture, she thought for less than a minute, then started singing Salam's life away faster than the translator could type. Well, why not? She was a stranger in a strange land doing what she could to get by. Like the rest of us.

I saw her on TV the next day on her way to court. She didn't look like much. Haggard, with swollen eyes, her cheeks striped with tear tracks, she looked almost ordinary. But I doubt she'll be crying for long. She's far, far from home and on her own. Her only chance is to pull herself together and paste that million-dollar smile back in place. And I think she will. They say it takes one to know one, and I recognized her the moment we met.

She's got a money face. The genuine article. Oh, most of us have a money face of one kind or another. A mask we wear to keep the world at bay. A plastic smile or maybe a scowl. But Najwa has the real thing. The kind of face men carve into cameos. Or write songs about. Or kill for. Not movie-star quality maybe, but close enough. For Salam, and Solly. And even for me.

But I know I'll never be that new man in her life. It's not that I'm immune to beauty. Far from it. It's just that she's got one kind of money face. And I've got another. ●

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Art by Greg Voth

QUIET PLEASE— WE'RE ROLLING

by Peter Lovesey

A naked man on a tropical beach was chasing a small white dog that had just run off with his swimming trunks. The scene was shot from the rear. Once in a while, a bare bum is acceptable for early evening viewing.

Albert Challis, in his bedsit in Reading, reached for another can of lager, his eyes never leaving the screen of the small portable TV.

"Jesus! I don't know how they get away with this. It's bloody obvious most of it is faked."

His wife Karen continued mending the jumper on her lap, oblivious to Albert's ranting. She didn't enjoy the programme, and she had a long evening in prospect, repairing clothes.

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There was no escape from the TV when you lived in a bedsit.

Albert continued, after a belch, "When this show first went out, I reckon most of the clips were genuine. Then they started offering a few hundred quid for new material. Stands to reason people are going to fake the incidents. They set up someone making a fool of himself, roll the camera, and cash in."

He watched in cynical expectation as a grey man in a grey room began painting a door frame. A second later the door opened and the hapless decorator was dowsed in red.

"Well, knock me down with a feather," said Albert with heavy sarcasm. "I never saw that one coming. It's like I say, Karen. The whole thing's a setup."

Karen folded the jumper and placed it on her "done" pile, then turned her attention to a black woollen sock. It was one of Albert's, the survivor of a pair he had worn so proudly on their wedding day, eighteen years ago. Now it contained as much darning wool as original thread, but Albert insisted it wasn't ready for the rag box yet.

On the screen a well-dressed woman in a stable yard started walking beside the half-doors where the horses were kept.

"Ay-up!" said Albert. "Watch what happens to her big straw hat. There it goes!"

Sure enough, a horse's head appeared suddenly from one of the stables and got the woman's hat between its teeth and whipped it off her head and out of reach.

"I bet they rehearsed it three times."

Karen had looked up and watched the clip, prompted by Albert's "Ay-up!" "If they did," she said, "they must have got through more than one hat. It's very destructive. I've never had a hat as nice as that."

Albert said, "It seems to me all you have to do is buy one of these bloody camcorders and the money's yours. They'll take anything, slipping on some ice, falling into a pond, being hit on the head by a football, any bloody thing. You could make one a week, I reckon. Shoot it on Saturday, send it to the television people on the Monday, and, bingo, the cheque arrives on Wednesday. We could live like kings on that sort of money, Karen."

Karen looked down at her darning again. "Well, why not, if it's so simple? Why not get one of those cameras and try it?"

Albert had no immediate answer. He placed his can on the aged carpet and folded both arms across his ample beer belly. The best

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he could manage in response was a smile that was meant to be superior.

Karen said, "You're all mouth and trousers, Albert Challis. You say it's all a con, but you don't have the bottle to prove it."

Albert found his voice. "I'm not sure I heard you correctly, my sweet," he said. "You did just suggest buying one of those camcorders, didn't you? When was the last time you looked in the bloody shop window? Have you any idea of the price of those things?"

Karen shook her head. They didn't have the sort of money most other people seemed to have. Nothing in their household had been bought new. They got it all secondhand. Whatever broke, burst, or wore out had to be repaired.

"They cost a bloody fortune, woman," Albert ranted. "Hundreds of pounds. Can you imagine that, a little piece of black plastic costing five hundred quid?"

Karen shook her head, returning to the rhythmical comfort of needle and thread.

Albert finished his lager, watching a fat woman being chased across a field by a goat while the studio audience guffawed. "The point is," he said in support of his apparent caution, "I'm not prepared to splash out five hundred on a camcorder when we only stand to make two hundred and fifty back."

"But you just said you could make one a week and we could live like royalty," Karen reminded him. "Soon as I call your bluff, you back off."

Albert shot her a filthy look. "Don't you provoke me."

"It's not as if we haven't got the money," Karen persisted. "We must have more than five hundred in the bank."

"Never you mind what we have or haven't got in the bank, Karen."

"I do mind," she said. "It's mine as much as yours. I work to keep us going, same as you. The cooking, the cleaning, the mending. I think we ought to have a joint account and then I'd know how much we're worth."

"You'd spend it in a week," said Albert. "Look, if anything happened to me, God forbid, that money goes to you, right? All my worldly goods. Satisfied?"

The programme was coming to an end. The grinning host was saying, ". . . be sure to keep your home-movie clips coming in, because you could be the winner of our Clip-of-the-Series prize, and that's worth a cool ten thousand pounds."

"Ten grand!" said Albert, deeply impressed. "Now that might be

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worth lashing out for. The clip of the series. We'd have to think of something really brilliant. Get me a pen and paper, quick. I'm taking down the address."

In bed, Karen was trying her best to sleep, drawing the thin blankets tightly around her, thinking of continental quilts, double glazing, and central heating. She wondered how much they really had in that bank account.

Albert's voice broke into her fantasies. "It would have to be a really great caper. Something completely fantastic. They wouldn't give the money for one more silly kid messing about with a hosepipe."

Karen said, "Are you still on about that programme?"

"I'm on about ten grand."

There was an interval of silence before Karen spoke again.

"It would have to be believable."

"What do you mean?"

She raised herself onto her elbows, any hope of sleep impossible as long as Albert was preoccupied with the big prize. "Well," she said, "when you see most of those clips, the situation is just unreal. You couldn't believe in it."

The bed creaked and Albert rolled towards her. "Go on. I'm listening."

"Tonight, for instance," Karen said. "The chap who ended covered in paint. You yourself said it was probably all set up for the programme. I mean, who would want to film a door being painted?"

Albert clutched her arm. "You've hit the nail on the head. It's hardly a prime home-movie subject."

Karen explained, "That's why the ones they show at weddings work so well. You know, when they can't get the knife into the cake and they knock it off the stand. Or a breeze gets under the bride's gown and lifts it up to her waist. Stuff like that. People accept them as genuine accidents because a wedding is the place where you take your video camera."

"But you can't mess up someone's wedding just to get a laugh on video," Albert said, misreading the plot.

"That's just an example," said Karen. "All I'm telling you is that to win the big prize you'd have to find a situation when it would be perfectly normal to be filming. Then it looks genuine, and it's funnier, too."

Albert pondered the matter further. "Weddings, kiddies' parties,

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barbeques, village fetes. Where else do people take these little cameras?"

"Holidays," Karen dreamily replied. She yawned. "Night, night." She turned over, trying to find a comfortable spot between the thinly covered mattress springs.

Albert's eyes were gleaming in the dark. He reached out and fondled Karen's rump. "You're brilliant."

"Shove off," she said, pushing his hand away.

"What I have, I hold," said Albert, replacing it. "You and I are going to take a holiday, my sweet. A caravan holiday."

"A *caravan,* did you say?"

"And I know where to get one. That bloke across the street who keeps it on his drive."

"Mr. Tinker? He wouldn't let us borrow his caravan."

"I bet he will. He doesn't use it himself. Since the divorce, it's been stuck on that drive for two years. He'll be glad to be rid of it."

"*Rid* of it?" said Karen, failing to understand.

"We'll be doing him a favour," said Albert. "What does he want with a caravan? He'll make a few quid on the insurance. I'll speak to him tomorrow."

When Albert returned from his chat with Joe Tinker, he was practically turning cartwheels of joy. "He couldn't be more helpful," he told Karen. "Like I said, he's got no more use for the caravan. We're welcome to do just whatever we like with it."

"Take it on holiday?"

"We're doing him a favour," said Albert. "He won't have to park his car on the street anymore. But that isn't all. I told him what this is about."

"You told him?" said Karen, horrified.

"Everything. To get his cooperation," said Albert. "He's seen the programme and he thinks the same as us. He says this is one hell of a stunt and he reckons we can't fail to win the big money. I've told him I'll give him a couple of hundred if we do. Fair enough, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Karen, "but can we trust him to stay quiet about it?"

"That's why he gets a cut. He's part of the conspiracy, then," said Albert. "But I haven't told you the best part. Joe Tinker also owns a camcorder. Yes, I'm not kidding. He's going to lend it to us for nothing. For nothing, Karen! What's more, he'll show you how to use it."

"Me?" said Karen.

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"Unless you want to be making an idiot of yourself on television, you've got to be holding the camera, pointing it at me. And it's got to be done properly. Good focusing. No shaking. You only get one take, remember. It's got to be right first time, and it's got to be up to professional standard to win the ten grand."

She said nervously, "I don't think I can do it, Albert."

" 'Course you can! They're simple, these camcorders, dead simple. I told Joe you'll be over for some instruction this afternoon. He's a good bloke, and he fancies you anyway. He'll give you all the confidence in the world."

"What is this stunt, anyway?" said Karen.

"We take a holiday, like I said, towing Joe's caravan."

"Where to?"

"Some remote part of Wales. I'm going to study the map this afternoon while you're learning to be an ace camerawoman. If you get your certificate of competence we can drive down there next Saturday for the shoot."

"The shoot?"

"Of the film," Albert explained. "Get with it, love. We're shooting a film, remember? Like I say, we hook the caravan to my old Cortina. Joe's lending me his towbar as well. He's great."

"Is it strong enough?"

"The towbar?"

"Your car. Those caravans are big things to tow."

"No problem," said Albert. "We can take it gently, just tootling along. We'll be stopping every few miles, filming bits and pieces of our journey."

"What for?"

Albert sighed. Everything always had to be explained to Karen. "Because it has to look like we're on a proper holiday. We need about twenty minutes of boring holiday stuff to divert suspicion from our real intentions. Can't you see how phony it will look if the only thing on the tape is the caravan going over the cliff?"

Karen gasped in horror. "Over the cliff? Mr. Tinker's caravan?"

Albert smiled. "With only the seagulls as witnesses—apart from the camera and fifteen million viewers."

"It's insane!"

"That's why it's going to win ten grand. What a spectacle! I'm going to look at the Ordnance Survey and find a bit of the coast with a gentle slope leading to the cliff edge, and a good long drop to the rocks below. We park the caravan thirty yards up the slope. That way I have time to get out."

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"Get out?"

"Before it rolls over. It's going to be sensational. You'll be outside filming the scenery from the cliff top. You pan around to me at the window of the caravan. I'll hold up a bit of metal and say, 'What's this, love?' The caravan will start to move. I'll shout something the TV people will have to bleep out—the audience always loves that—then I leap from the door holding the broken hand brake of the caravan, to watch the thing roll over the edge." He laughed out loud and raised his arms like a boxer who has just heard his opponent counted out.

"It's so dangerous," said Karen. "I mean, it's a tremendous idea, but . . ."

Albert brushed the objection aside. "No risk at all," he said. "If you're nervous, we'll give the van fifty yards to roll, instead of thirty."

In the week that followed, Albert planned the "shoot," as he called it, with military precision. Having selected several possible cliff-top sites, he drove down to Wales to make a decision on the most suitable. He found one on the Pembrokeshire coast that was wonderfully remote, with a grassy slope leading straight to a two-hundred-foot drop. In his spare moments he worked diligently on the script that he and Karen would have to follow, complete with stage directions.

"We only get one shot at this," he told her when he returned from scouting the locations. "It has to go like clockwork, while appearing totally unplanned. How are the lessons going?"

"All right," Karen said.

"You've been clocking in with Joe, have you, while I was away?"

She nodded.

"Mastered it yet?"

"I hope so."

"Hope isn't good enough," said Albert. "You've got to be certain. Are you going over to see him again?"

"This afternoon."

"Excellent. He's a good bloke, isn't he?"

"He's very good," said Karen, and she meant it.

"While you're in there, I'm going to do a bit of work on the old caravan. It could do with a clean. The smarter it looks, the better the effect."

So whilst Albert sponged and polished, preparing the caravan for its TV debut, Karen had more tuition from Joe. Really, as Joe

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explained, the camcorder was a simple machine that almost anyone could use, but if the attractive Mrs. Challis wanted more practice with the thing, he was only too pleased to show her how to hold it. No woman had been inside his house since his wife had divorced him two years ago.

For her part, Karen was not displeased to feel Joe's arm around her shoulders steadying the camera from time to time. He was a most considerate man, and not bad looking, either. And he had double glazing and central heating. "It seems a real shame that you're going to lose your caravan through this," she said.

"Not at all," said Joe cheerfully. "It's had its day. I've no more use for it. Besides, it's not in very good condition anymore. The door has warped in the damp. You have to give it quite a tug to open it. Better mention that to Albert. A little grease around the sides will ease it."

Extremely early Saturday morning, when it was still dark and nobody was about, Albert went over to Joe's to attach the towbar. He'd arranged to collect Karen at the last minute. She sat in their front room with the lights off, mentally revising the instructions for the video camera. She had collected the camera from Joe after one last session of instruction the previous afternoon. Joe had been a tower of strength.

After what seemed like a couple of hours, Albert drew the caravan from its mooring and swung the car across the street. Karen climbed in, camcorder in hand.

"You'll do no filming in this light," Albert said tensely. "I don't know what you're holding it for. Chuck it on the backseat."

"It doesn't belong to us," said Karen.

Instead of "tootling along" as he'd promised, Albert drove fast for the first two hours. Two or three times Karen said she was nervous about the car, but he didn't slow down. Near the Welsh border, as dawn came up, she suggested a stop for filming. Albert said there would be opportunities later.

She reminded him of the reason for having some footage of other places as well as the cliff top, and he relented and let her film some sheep sheltering at the side of the road.

Albert looked at his watch. "I want to get on," he told her. "The light isn't so good in the middle of the day. It gets too bright."

"Joe said it doesn't matter what time of day you film with one of these."

"Will you shut up about Joe?"

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As they neared their destination, Albert made a couple of short stops to consult the map. The area was very remote.

About ten in the morning, the cliff came up on their left. Albert steered the car off the road and towed the caravan across the turf to the position he'd selected. He secured the brake on the caravan, uncoupled the car, and drove back to a point near the road. They had a good view for miles around and no one was in sight.

"Smell it, love?" said Albert.

"The sea air?" said Karen.

"Money, stupid. Ten bloody grand."

"It's a good thing there's no wind," Karen pointed out as they walked towards the caravan. "This should be good for sound."

"You talk like you work for the BBC."

Albert walked towards the cliff edge and peered over. "Perfect," he enthused. "The tide's in. There's a thumping great drop, and it's going to get smashed to little bits and washed away and turn to driftwood." He came back to where Karen was standing with the camcorder. "Want to run over your lines?"

"It's all right," she said nervously. "Let's get on with it."

"Make sure it's working first."

She switched on and checked the battery level for the umpteenth time. She took some footage of Albert standing with his back to the cliff edge and they played it back through the eyepiece to check. The clarity was wonderful.

Albert seemed to be getting his confidence back. "Isn't it just like I promised? The gentle grassy slope, the impressive visual panorama, the sheer bloody suspense of the thing? And just look at that caravan!"

"Like ten thousand grand," she said, admiring the polished chrome and freshly cleaned surface.

Albert walked her to her position. "Now you do know what to do?"

She nodded.

"And what to say?"

"Mm."

"Let's get on with it, then."

She watched him walk to the caravan. He had some difficulty opening the door, but he managed it at the second attempt, climbed inside, slammed the door, and took his place by the window, opening it wide.

"Can you hear me all right?"

"Perfectly, Albert."

"Are we ready to roll, then?"

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"Yes."

"Remember what I said. Establish the shot with a view of that cliff to your left, showing just how big the drop is, then pan around slowly along the cliff edge and across the grass to me. Right?"

"Right."

"Start the camcorder now. Action."

Heart thumping, Karen pressed the red Record button, swinging slowly around to encompass the impressive-looking cliff. She didn't care anymore that her hands were shaking. She watched the grass in the lens, then the white gleam of the caravan, then Albert at the window.

True to his script, he held up a piece of metal. The caravan lurched on its mooring feet, and for a second Karen feared that it wasn't going to move.

Albert spoke his words: "Do you know what this is, love?"

The caravan began to roll.

"It's the brake, Albert! What is it doing in your hand? Get out—the van's moving!"

"Bloody hell!"

She saw Albert move fast towards the door and waited for the panic to set in for real.

Thirty yards to the edge.

She screamed his name as loudly as possible, mainly to obscure his shouting. She had stopped filming, of course.

The caravan moved sedately on its way.

He was desperately trying to open the jammed caravan door. How many times had Joe stressed to her that she should tell Albert to grease the edges? Not once had she considered passing on the information. She wanted Albert to die.

Twenty yards to go, and it was picking up a little speed.

The worst thing would be finding a phone in this godforsaken place. The closest must be miles away. Everything else would be simple. A few tears for the police. Then hand over the tape. "It must be all on here, Officer. It's been the most awful accident."

Karen continued to scream, thinking of her future with Joe Tinker, with his double glazing and his central heating and his modern fully sprung bed with the continental quilt.

Ten yards.

Five.

A moment before the caravan disappeared from view, the cara-

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van door burst open and Albert flung himself out and hit the turf a yard from the edge. He had survived.

Karen was devastated. She flung down the camcorder and stamped her foot.

Fortunately, Albert was too shaken to notice. He still lay face-down, panting.

Eventually she drew herself together and went to him. She could probably have pushed him over, he was so near, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. That would be too direct, a hands-on murder.

Albert said, "That was a bloody near thing."

"What went wrong?" said Karen as innocently as she was able.

"Couldn't get the bloody door open. I knew it was difficult. Found that out when I was cleaning the thing. Put some grease on it yesterday, but it wasn't enough, obviously. Ended up kicking my way out." He got to his feet. "Look at me. I'm shaking like a leaf."

Karen said, "Let's get you to the car."

"Where's the camera?"

"Oh, I dropped it over there," she said. "I'm not sure how much I got. God, I was frightened!"

"Doesn't matter, love," said Albert with unusual tenderness. "We can't use the video anyway."

"Why not?"

"Evidence. If they ever find anything at the bottom of that cliff and come knocking on our door, the last thing we want is a bloody video of the event."

She frowned. "They could only find the caravan."

Albert was shaking his head. "There's something else. With luck, the sea will take care of it."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Bloody Joe Tinker. When I went in to see him this morning, he said he wanted a half share of the profits. *Five grand!* You know me, love. Mean as hell. I lashed out. Hit the bleeder against the kitchen stove and cracked his skull. Killed him outright. What could I do but shove him into his own bloody caravan and bring him down here for disposal?"

"Oh God, no!" wailed Karen.

"Don't shed tears over him," said Albert. "Didn't you ever notice he fancied you something rotten, the jerk? Like I told you the other night, what I have, I hold." ●

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Crossword for Murder

by Percy Spurlark Parker

There had been one other murder in Gable Lakes, but that was back in 1923. Hester Peeples had gotten fed up with her husband's womanizing and had taken an axe to him one night as he slept. It would've made a great trivia question, except it was one of those things everybody in town knew.

The word hadn't gotten around about the second murder; Sheriff Ann Rozlow had only been on the scene fifteen minutes herself. She stood nearby, watching Doc Greene perform his preliminary examination. Her stomach felt a little uneasy, but she was the sheriff so she forced herself to stand there.

Author of the 1974 novel *Good Girls Don't Get Murdered* and of short stories published in *EQMM, AHMM,* and several anthologies, Percy Spurlark Parker recently moved from Chicago to Las Vegas, Nevada. "I'm not sure how the move will affect my writing," he told us. "Maybe I'll get a new perspective on the streets of Chicago, or perhaps I'll find that Bull Benson [the series character in most of his stories] has a relative out here."

Walter Marsh, the town's only insurance broker, lay on the floor at the corner of his desk, a crumpled piece of paper held tight in his fist. His wife had discovered the body when she'd come by the office to take her husband to lunch.

"Shot once in the chest, close range," Doc Greene said. "Small caliber, it looks like; wouldn't've made much noise." He pried the paper from Marsh's fist and handed it to Ann.

She straightened the paper as best she could. It was a sheet from a four-by-six notepad, and with the exception of a few traces of blood, there was nothing on it.

"Blank," she said.

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Doc Greene stood. He was one of two doctors in Gable Lakes and also served as the coroner. He was a tall, thin man with a mane of white hair, and his great passion besides medicine was crossword puzzles. Marsh had been a nut about them too; he and Doc Greene were always racing to see who'd finish the latest magazine. "Think he was trying to leave a message?"

The pad the sheet had come from lay on the floor next to Marsh, but there was no pen or pencil in sight. "I'll admit it would've been nice if the killer's name was scribbled on this piece of paper."

In a way she had inherited the badge. Her father had been Gable Lakes's sheriff for over twenty years when the heart attack struck. She'd worked in and out of his office through high school and after, alongside Danny Rozlow, her father's deputy. Danny was promoted to sheriff. They had been kind of a twosome, her father's death bringing them closer together. They were married, all was well . . . until that winter when Danny was killed in an auto accident. The town council was quick to act in a measure to soften the two tragedies in her life, and had offered her the job.

She took the lifeline that was thrown to her. It gave her a purpose, a focus. The sheriff's office had done well by her, and she had done well by it. In truth, it wasn't a very taxing job, nothing really major ever happened in Gable Lakes . . . until now.

"I'm going to miss ol' Wally," Doc Greene said. "He was the only one around here who really gave me a run with my puzzles. What d'you think went down, Sheriff?"

"What?"

Doc Greene shrugged his thin shoulders. "Isn't that the way they talk on TV, and in all them detective books?"

"Yeah, I guess, Doc, but I don't have any idea what has gone down, or how to go about finding out."

"Well, let's see," Doc Greene said, looking about the room. "First, Wally's chair is pushed up to his desk. So, he wasn't sitting at his desk when he got shot. No one would get up and push his chair back in place, regardless of how minor the wound, and Wally's wound wasn't minor. So, I'd say he was shot pretty much where he fell. He managed to raise himself up to the desk to leave a message." Doc Greene stepped behind the desk, moved some papers around, uncovering a ballpoint pen at the far end. "He got the pad but couldn't find the pen, or collapsed before he had a chance to search further."

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"Thanks, Doc, you've made more sense out of this than I was doing."

"Hey, every Holmes needs a Watson."

"Did Watson ever point the killer out to Holmes?"

Doc Greene scratched the side of his jaw. "I'm not sure, but that's a little bit out of the range for this Watson, although a couple of things do come to mind."

"Like?"

"The resort, and, well—" Doc Greene shrugged. "—Sara."

The Gable Lakes Resort was the brainchild of land developer Carson Plainfield. He had arrived in town about three months ago, getting the financial community excited over the prospect, Marsh being one of the main people in that group. The resort was to encompass a huge stretch of land just to the west of town. The goal was to have it completed in two years, bringing a windfall of tax money for the town, and making the investors indecently wealthy.

There were also those in town who opposed the building of a resort, not wanting to turn Gable Lakes into a mega tourist spot. Some were more vocal than others. Kevin Delbert in particular came to mind. He owned a patch of land along the lake that would be adjacent to the proposed resort property. He wasn't shy about letting folks know he was against the idea of a resort. He had an open letter in the *Gable Lakes Gazette* two or three times a week.

Then there was Sara Marsh. Local gossip had her running off with a hardware salesman last summer, returning after a two-week fling. Ann had never dug into the rumors; it really was none of her business. The Marshes attended church together every Sunday and occasionally dined out. On the surface everything looked to be back to normal.

Listening to Doc Greene, Ann realized there were a number of things she should be doing right now, although she wasn't sure just where to start. She could call in the state police; they had officers trained in homicide investigations. The idea was appealing to her, but she couldn't overlook the fact that she was the sheriff and she should at least try. The state police would always be there if need be.

"Can you handle things on this end, Doc? Looks like I've got some investigating to do."

"By all means, Sheriff."

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Since Marsh had only a one-room office, Ann had asked Deputy Oaks to take Sara Marsh home and stay until she got there. It was a modest place, on a small bluff overlooking the south end of town.

Sara Marsh, her eyes red and swollen from crying, sat on the couch opposite Ann. "He was just lying there when I came in. I called to him, shook him, but he didn't move."

"Sara, did Walter give you any hint of there being a problem anywhere? Someone he was having trouble with?"

"No, I'm completely confused by this," she said, shaking her head slightly. A golden curl dangled near her right ear. "Walter told me he'd gotten into a shouting match the other day with Kevin Delbert in front of Top's Restaurant over the resort. But I can't believe Kevin would've done this."

Ann had forgotten, but word had gotten to her about the verbal confrontation. As usual, Kevin had initiated the whole thing and it hadn't lasted long. It had ended with Walter calling him a fool, and he in return calling Walter a money-hungry jerk.

"Walter was a dull, mostly unimaginative man," Sara continued. "I don't understand how he could have done anything to force someone to kill him."

"Mostly unimaginative?" Deputy Oaks chimed in. He was standing behind Ann, just to her right.

Sara Marsh glanced up to the deputy, but looked at Ann when she spoke. "Come on now, you both knew Walter. Tell me, when have you ever seen him do anything a bit spontaneous? That just wasn't him. He was always checking and rechecking. This resort is the only thing that's added any spark to him in years. That and those damn crossword puzzles. He was putting in a lot of time on the project. He seemed happy with it."

"And you, Sara?"

She seemed to think for a moment before answering. "I had my fling, Ann. When I came back to Gable Lakes I didn't fool myself about what I was coming back to. It hasn't been much better than what it was before, maybe a little worse in ways. But I came back to stay."

"Sara, did you kill your husband?"

"No." There was no hesitation in her answer, no shifting in her direct stare.

Ann wasn't sure what she expected to accomplish, but it was a question that had to be asked.

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"Well," Deputy Oaks asked as he walked her to her station wagon. "Do you believe her?"

"If you're asking if I think she killed her husband, I can't make that call right now, I won't even try. There's a lot more sorting out we've got to do."

Oaks shrugged his hefty shoulders. "In that case, where to next, boss lady?"

She got lucky and found Carson Plainfield at the bank with Homer Morton. They were both in Homer's office when she and Deputy Oaks entered. They half rose from their chairs, reseating themselves as she took the chair on Plainfield's right. Oaks stayed by the door.

"Such a tragedy," Homer said from behind his desk. His double chin had a slight motion of its own as he shook his head.

She wasn't surprised that they had heard about the murder; Walter's office was only a half block away. In fact, she figured by now the whole town knew.

Besides being owner and president of the town's only bank, Homer Morton had also run for mayor on two occasions, losing out the last time by only three percent of the vote, which for Gable Lakes accounted for twenty-three citizens. "We can't let this murderer get away, Ann. What are you doing about it?"

"Well, interviewing the both of you, for one thing."

"What? See here, I—"

"Relax, Homer," Plainfield said, "let the sheriff do her job. That's got to be difficult for her too."

"Thanks," Ann said.

Homer grumbled a little bit more, then said, "Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Ann. How can we help?"

"I'm just gathering information for now, trying to get a direction on which way to go. When was the last time either of you saw Walter?"

"Yesterday afternoon," Homer said.

"Yesterday morning for me," Plainfield said. He was somewhere in his early forties, with just a hint of gray; a wide smile normally accompanied his open, trusting face.

"Did he come here, to your office, Homer?"

"Well, yes, he did. Walter had been looking into financing for the resort through his insurance connections, just as I have been

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going through my banking affiliations. He said he was pretty close to wrapping up some major investments, but he had a few more things to check first. The money is out there, you just have to know how to wheel and deal, and sometimes beg, to get your hands on it."

"And you, Mr. Plainfield?"

"I saw him at his office," Plainfield said with a slight nod. "It went pretty much the same way as it did with Homer. He hadn't heard anything, still waiting for some combine back East to get in touch."

"So, would both of you say things were progressing with the resort?"

They both nodded this time, and Plainfield added, "I haven't felt as positive as this about any project I've ever worked on. Aside from our main vocal adversary, Mr. Delbert, I believe Gable Lakes wants the resort."

"What about Kevin Delbert?" Homer wanted to know. "He could have killed Walter to try to halt the resort. My God, we might be his next victims. Sheriff, you'll have to give us round-the-clock protection."

"In order for me to do that, I'll have to lock up both of you."

"I think Homer is getting a little carried away, Sheriff. Myself, I've always viewed Mr. Delbert as more of a big mouth than an actual threat. This could be an exception, but it's been my experience that a loudmouth generally sticks to being a loudmouth."

Homer sat up straighter in his chair, his jaws puffy in his frown. "Well, somebody killed Walter. If it wasn't Kevin, then who?"

Ann didn't have the answer, and it seemed as if a full minute went by while Homer waited for a reply.

"Sara," he said, answering his own question. "It had to be her. You know, he never got over her leaving him. I don't know if he told her or not, but he told me. He wanted the resort to go through more than anything, and as soon as profits started rolling in, he was the one going to leave town this time."

She felt she should be forming some kind of conclusion as to the killer's identity, or at least a list of those who couldn't have done it. But as she drove away from the bank she was more confused than ever, and the prospect of calling in the state police looked more and more attractive.

Kevin Delbert was the only person she figured she logically had

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left to talk to. After him, it was the entire population of Gable Lakes one by one or the state police. An easy choice there.

It generally took a good half-hour to get to the rolling patch of land near the lake that Kevin called home, but she didn't have to make the trip. As she neared her office, she saw his red Jeep Cherokee parked in front, with him sitting on the fender.

"Afternoon, Sheriff," he said as she climbed out of her station wagon. "Thought you might want to see me."

Under the ragged red beard was a man in his mid thirties who'd lived in Gable Lakes all his life. He was the town's most popular handyman, with a knack of being able to fix just about anything.

Deputy Oaks pulled up on the other side of Kevin's Jeep, got out, and came around to them, nodding a hello.

"I ain't killed nobody, Sheriff. Not saying what Walter and the others planned to do with the land up there shouldn't be a capital offense."

"I'm not accusing you yet, Kevin. Although I heard about your shouting match with Walter."

"And what about my argument with Stanley Fratt last month, and Mrs. Haas the month before that? Sheriff, it's the kind of guy I am. Things bother me and I tell people. I came here to try to save some time, and maybe help you find the killer."

Oaks cleared his throat. "How're you planning to do that?"

"Well, it seems to me it's somebody in that resort crowd. Anytime you got a get-rich-quick scheme, there's got to be something illegal about it. Maybe just a little bit, maybe a lot. What does anyone in town really know about Plainfield?"

"I'm sure Mr. Plainfield's credentials have been checked," Ann said, although she had never bothered to do so herself. It was something Homer and Walter would've taken care of during their normal course of business, or should have.

"Okay, maybe they have." Kevin shrugged. "But if they get the resort built, it's going to throw a lot of money into the pot. Now there's one less share to worry about."

"Kevin, do you have any facts or is this guesswork?"

"I just think it's common sense. Listen, from what I got around town, no one heard the gunshot, which tells me it was a small-caliber bullet, a little popgun. Right? Wrong?"

"It looks that way," Ann admitted.

"Nobody has a gun like that around here. Hell, look at that hog

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you got strapped to your side. You shoot that thing and half the town is bound to hear it."

The gun had belonged to her father. It was a six-inch barrel, .44 mag, and she had long since gotten over the weight of carrying it around.

"It's an outsider's gun. The kind a city-slicking land developer might carry."

"Are you sure you're trying to help, or are you still trying to get the resort stopped?" Ann asked.

"Sounds like you're on the same old bandwagon to me," Oaks joined in. "If it was somebody from that group, like you said, that would just about squash the resort plans."

There was a smile somewhere in Kevin's beard. "Then I truly could say justice would be served."

She welcomed the aroma of Doc Greene's strong coffee as she poured herself a cup from the battered pot on his hot plate. Kevin had been trying to sic her on Plainfield, it was as obvious as the red bush on his face. Although a lot of what he said rang true, a small-caliber gun was not only the type a city-slicking land developer might carry, it was also a woman's gun. Sure, she packed a hefty weapon, but when women carried a gun it was usually a small-caliber revolver or automatic. That turned the finger on all the women in town, most notably Sara Marsh.

"This investigation stuff is hard work," Doc Greene said. He sat at his desk, a crossword puzzle book in hand. "You look like hell."

"Just still pretty confused," she said, flopping on the corner of his desk. She'd decided to drop in on the doc and use him as a sounding board before calling the state police.

"I was hoping you'd have it all figured out by now. It would really be something if our sheriff wrapped this up all by herself."

"I doubt if that's going to happen."

"You did talk to everybody you wanted to, didn't you?"

"I guess," she said, and gave him the names.

"Okay, so who doesn't have an alibi?"

She almost choked on the coffee as she laughed. "I don't need to be doing this, Doc. The most basic question and I didn't even ask it. Damn, I've really messed this up."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, it's your first time out. A mistake or two is expected. Relax. Try a crossword puzzle."

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"Is that your answer to all the ills in the world, Doc? No thanks, I've never been much good at those things."

"Try it. With Wally gone I'm going to need somebody to keep me sharp. Come on, what's a four-letter word that denotes winter?"

"Cold."

He traced over the puzzle with his pencil. "Naw, try again."

She put a little thought in it this time. "Snow?"

"Yeah, that'll do it." He jotted it down. "Maybe you've got a talent for this after all."

"It was just a guess."

"Naw, Wally had a talent for it too. Sometimes I'd missed the easy ones and he'd be right there to point it out. Too bad he didn't get the chance to give us his killer's name. What's another word for sequin?"

"Ornament," she said.

"Hey, all right. I might be creating a monster here. What's another word for—"

"Blank."

"What?"

"Walter did identify his killer." It had all started to come together for her, thanks to Walter and Doc Greene and their crossword puzzles.

"What d'you mean?"

"With you being the coroner, Walter knew you'd be on the scene. So, he left the killer's name for his ol' crossword puzzle pal to figure out."

"There was nothing but a blank piece of paper there," Doc Greene said, lines marking his normally smooth forehead.

"Precisely. And what's another word for blank?"

"Empty. . . . Void," he said, paused, then looked directly at her. Plain."

"As in Plainfield," she finished.

"It was right there all the time."

She set her coffee cup on the desk as she stood. Apparently Kevin wasn't that far off the mark after all.

"It may take a little doing to prove, but at least we know who to concentrate on." She adjusted her gun belt. "Now if you'll excuse me, Doc. I think it's time our land developer got a good look at the inside of our jail." ●

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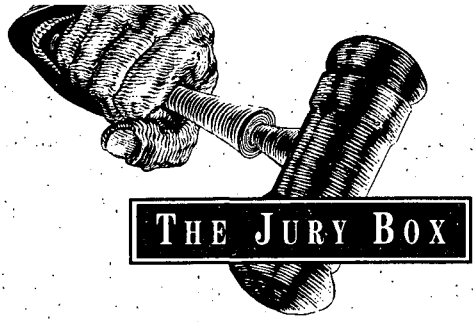

by Jon L. Breen

Bill Pronzini's Nameless Detective, the middle-aged, pulp-magazine-collecting San Francisco shamus who debuted in book form in *The Snatch* (1971), isn't quite the dean of active fictional private eyes. Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer (1947) is scheduled for a new case this year; Richard S. Prather's Shell Scott (1950) and Michael Avallone's Ed Noon (1953), though recently quiet, are eligible for comebacks; Michael Collins's Dan Fortune came along in 1967, and Joe Gores's Daniel Kearny Associates team (of the recent *Contract Null & Void* [Mysterious, $21.95]), though their first book appearance was in 1972, were active in *EQMM* short stories in the late sixties. Still, most of the current crop of private eyes have had somewhat to much shorter lives in print than the quarter century of Nameless, who celebrates his silver anniversary with both a collection and a novel-length case, considered below and followed by the latest cases of some old favorites and newer recruits to the sleuth-for-hire ranks.

**** Bill Pronzini: *Spadework,* Crippen & Landru, P. O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505-9315, $16 trade paperback. Thirteen years after *Casefile* (1983) comes the second volume entirely devoted to Nameless short stories. Of the fifteen tales included, nine are previously uncollected, three of those from 1995 issues of *EQMM* and two ("Worried Mother Job" and "Zero Tolerance," the latter especially offbeat and amusing) appearing in print for the first time anywhere. There's also an introduction by Pronzini's wife and frequent collaborator Marcia Muller, an afterword by the author himself, and a checklist of the Nameless

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series that will be invaluable to collectors.

*** Bill Pronzini: *Sentinels,* Carroll & Graf, $20. A female college student, en route home to the Bay Area from Oregon with a new boyfriend, disappears, and an investigation for the worried mother brings Nameless to Creekside, the tiny and secretive Northern California town where the couple were last seen. The combination of plot, characters, locale, and humor is strong as always, but I had trouble believing Nameless could make his first sweep through the little town without picking up a certain vital piece of information.

**** Max Allan Collins: *Damned in Paradise,* Dutton, $23.95. In 1932, Chicago sleuth Nate Heller signs on as investigator for old family friend Clarence Darrow, about to make his last courtroom stand in a Hawaiian murder trial. The fictionalization of the Massie rape and murder case is one of Collins's best, the time, place, and characters (Darrow especially) vividly realized. Other celebrity guests include New York Mayor Jimmy Walker, swimming legends Buster Crabbe and Duke Kahanamoku, and (most intriguingly) Chang Apana, the Honolulu cop on whom Earl Derr Biggers's Charlie Chan was based.

*** Ed Gorman: *Hawk Moon,* St. Martin's, $21.95. FBI psychological profiler turned private eye Robert Payne looks into the murder of an Indian woman found with her nose and right arm cut off—and in alternating chapters another Gorman series character, turn-of-the-century Cedar Rapids policewoman Anna Tolan, investigates a similar slaying. Both the author and his sleuths are in solid form here—the portrait of Cedar Rapids then and now is almost as intriguing as the characters and the plot. (Having detectives from different periods in effect collaborate is a rare stunt—the only earlier example I can think of is Pronzini and Muller's *Beyond the Grave* [1986]. Edward D. Hoch's "The Problem of the Haunted Tepee" *[EQMM,* December 1990] almost qualifies, but an elderly Ben Snow and a young Dr. Sam Hawthorne actually meet face to face.

*** John Lutz: *Lightning,* Holt, $22.50. The central mystery in the latest well-told novel about Floridian Fred Carver is the blowing up of an abortion clinic in the course of which his longtime girlfriend Beth is injured. The crime itself and its solution embody ironies that partisans at both ends of the pro-life/ prochoice spectrum should appreciate.

*** Marcia Muller: *The Broken Promise Land,* Mysterious,

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$22.95. The cases of San Francisco operative Sharon McCone always manage to combine a suitably complex mystery plot with the continuing soap opera of her extended family of relatives and co-workers. This time her brother-in-law, wildly successful country singer Ricky Savage, is the object of threats, and in the course of the investigation there are plenty of surprises on both the professional and the personal front. Sharon's colleague Rae Kelleher plays an increasingly important role, even sharing the narration at times. Muller's solid professionalism never falters.

** Karen Kijewski: *Honky Tonk Kat,* Putnam, $22.95. Coincidentally (and unluckily for the author), the latest case for Sacramento bartender-turned-private eye Kat Colorado also involves the world of country music and anonymous threats to one of its stars, in this case Kat's girlhood friend Dakota Jones. Readable and sometimes amusing but excessively padded and less interestingly plotted, the novel suffers in the inevitable comparison to Muller's.

** Terence Faherty: *Kill Me Again,* Simon & Schuster, $22. Actor turned Hollywood shamus Scott Elliott investigates murder connected with the making of a postwar sequel to a *Casablanca*-like wartime classic. The writing and development are no more than routine, but the background of the film colony in the early days (1947) of the blacklist period is well handled and should attract readers interested in the time and place.

Ross Macdonald, with his emphasis on past events haunting the present and the bittersweet observations of the sad and wise and brave and deluded characters Lew Archer meets, has probably influenced the current crop of private eye writers even more than Hammett and Chandler. How does the 1963 classic *The Chill,* recently reprinted in trade paperback (Vintage/Black Lizard, $11), stack up against the books being published today? Few contemporaries could match the extremely complicated but ultimately comprehensible (as well as satisfactorily fair and surprising) solution of this whodunit, and the bits of description and character touches are as deft as you remember—with all that, Macdonald manages to keep his story zipping along nearly as briskly as a Perry Mason, a trait more of his present-day disciples should try to emulate. Two other strong Archer cases are also available (same publisher and price): *The Drowning Pool* (1950), and *Black Money* (1965).

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PERP WALK

by Andrew Vachss

"It's all set up, Tracy." It was the chief's bulldog voice, thick from the pressure of all the media attention. "Bring him on down," he said.

I keyed the microphone in the cruiser. "ETA under fifteen minutes, sir," I promised.

"I'll meet you out front. And Tracy . . ."

"Yes, Chief?"

"This case is a career-maker, son. I won't forget who cracked it."

"Thank you, sir."

I replaced the mike, glanced over my shoulder to the cage in the back of the prowl car. Wallace John Loomis sat back there, hands cuffed behind his broad back, a three-day stubble on his pockmarked face, dull eyes staring straight ahead like he was watching one of those TV cartoons he liked so much.

"You think he'll beat it? Take an NGI and go to the state hospital?" the fresh-faced young trooper behind the wheel asked me. He was only on the job for a year or so—he still loved the cop slang.

"Not guilty by reason of insanity? Not a chance, kid. Old Wallace ain't crazy, he's just slow in the head, that's all. Real slow."

"But isn't that the same as—?"

"Nah. Remember Homer Sistrunk? He had the IQ of a potted plant. But he was smart enough to rape and kill that old woman, right? They fry retards in this state, kid. And in a case like this . . ."

They were all waiting for us in the parking lot. Four in the afternoon, timed just perfect for the evening news. Better to let the TV

In both his legal practice and in print, Andrew Vachss has dedicated his career to fighting child abuse. His theme has proved popular with mystery readers: a collection of his short stories, *Born Bad* (title from an *EQMM* story), is in its sixth printing, and his novels, the latest of which is *False Allegations* (Knopf), are major sellers.

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people lead off, the chief always said. It's more dramatic. Besides, people don't read much anymore—let the newspapers lie until the morning editions.

I could see the bright yellow Channel 29 van right in front of the steps to the station house, the blond woman-half of the evening anchor team already set up in the floodlights, a wireless microphone in her hand. The working press was there too—I recognized the red-haired guy with the gray trench coat from the *Herald Dispatch.* A phalanx of uniformed troopers kept the crowd behind wooden sawhorse barriers.

The kid pulled the cruiser as close as he could. I got out and opened the back door, motioning for Loomis to get out, holding my hand gently over his head so he wouldn't bump it as he exited.

Then we did the perp walk. Loomis first, me next to him, right hand tight on his left bicep. The reporters shouted questions at him:

"Did you kill Mary Jo?"

"Do you have a statement to make?"

"Was anyone else involved?"

But Loomis didn't say anything, just stared straight ahead, putting one foot ahead of the other, moving slow, like he always did.

Once we got him locked up in one of the isolation cells, I came back outside. The chief was talking to the press, telling them how I had found the little girl's gym shorts in a shed at the back of the falling-down dump Loomis lived in alone.

"Good, old-fashioned police work," the chief said. "That's how these cases are solved. Not with computers, not with those FBI profiles . . . with classic investigative techniques. And I'm proud to say that when it comes to investigators, we've got one of the best in the business."

He gestured with his hand and I moved in next to him on the top of the steps. "I can't stop and answer any of your questions now," I told them all. "The defendant has indicated he wants to make a statement and—"

"Hasn't he asked for a lawyer?" one wise guy in the press corps asked me.

"No, he hasn't," I said calmly. "In fact, we've already had quite a long conversation, right after I placed him under arrest. I think his conscience . . . I better not say any more at this time," I cut myself off. "Talk to the chief. He's in charge. I've still got work to do."

❖ ❖ ❖

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I spent the whole night with Loomis, just him and me in the interrogation cell. Loomis doesn't talk much. Hell, he *can't* talk much. Mostly just mumbles and grunts. He liked fried chicken, though—I found that out.

I got him a whole bucket of that fried chicken, all for himself. With a double order of cole slaw and mashed potatoes. A six-pack of beer, too. And a portable TV set with a VCR, so he could watch cartoons.

We smoked three packs of cigarettes between us by four in the morning. Nobody came near us; they were letting me do my job. When Loomis finally fell asleep, I covered him with a blanket.

Then I called the chief.

It was almost noon before we were ready to go. This time, the national media were there. The word had gotten out—the perp was going to walk us right to the body.

Loomis looked pretty good. I made him take a shower and shave, and one of the guys brought him in some old clothes that were a pretty good fit.

I led the way in the Chevy Blazer we use for the back country. You need four-wheel drive in some of those gulleys, even in the dry season. I let Loomis ride next to me in the front bucket seat. He was handcuffed, and I controlled the lock to the passenger door, so there wasn't any risk.

We gave the media a half-hour to set up, then we started the walk. Me and Loomis, so close together I could hear his breathing. Every once in a while, I'd lean in real close and he'd say something to me.

The ground was so hard and dry it hadn't even picked up the tracks of the Blazer—you couldn't tell the last time somebody had been in that area.

I kept talking to Loomis. The cameras watched from a distance, even the most rabid members of the press not wanting to spoil this one chance of finding Mary Jo.

We walked for a long time. Finally, we came on an old shack. It was so decrepit only three walls were standing. I whispered to Loomis. He pointed toward the shack.

I bowed my head. The forensic squad moved in. Loomis just stared stupidly into space. It had taken me a long time to get him to understand he should point like I told him.

Right to where I'd buried Mary Jo's body. ●

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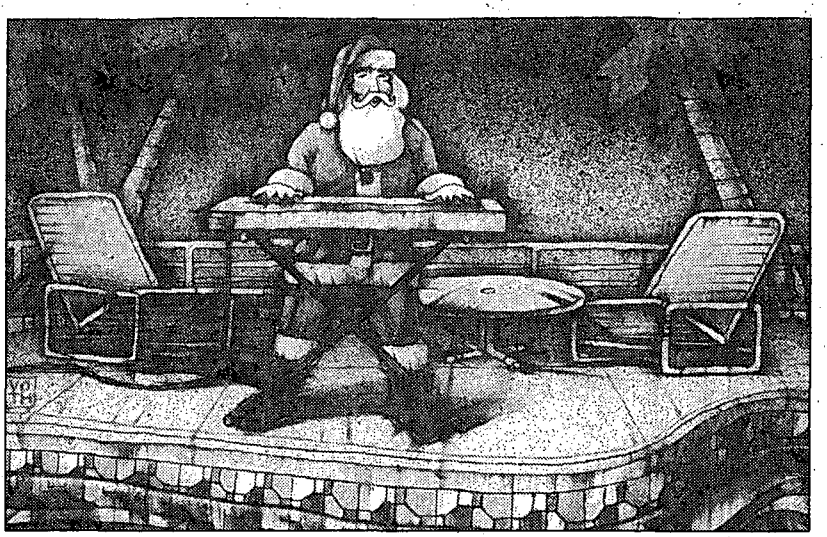

Art by Greg Voth

SOME LAND IN FLORIDA

by Peter Robinson

The morning they found Santa Claus floating facedown in the pool, I had a hangover of gargantuan proportions. By midday, I was starting to feel more human. By late afternoon, on my third Michelob at Chloe's, I was almost glad to be alive again. Almost. I was also coming to believe that Santa's death hadn't been quite the accident it appeared.

"Happy Hour" at Chloe's—a dim, horseshoe-shaped bar adjoining a restaurant—lasts from 11 A.M. to 7 P.M., and by late afternoon the desperation usually starts to show through the cracks: The men tell the same joke for the third or fourth time; the women laugh just a little too loudly.

The afternoon after Santa's death I found myself sitting opposite his small coterie. They were an odd group, the three of them who formed the central core. There was a grey-haired man, about sixty,

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who always looked ill to me despite his brick-red complexion; a size fourteen woman in her mid forties who wore size ten clothes; and a pretty blonde no older than about twenty-five. Maybe I'm being sexist or ageist or whatever, but I could only wonder why she was hanging around with such a bunch of losers. Christ, didn't she know that if she played her cards right she could have me?

Peter Robinson, a longtime resident of Ontario, Canada, has won numerous awards for his novels and short stories, many of which are set in his native England. He travels in a very different direction for this latest story, to a Florida resort town, for a Christmas that is anything but white.

Okay, so I'm no oil painting. But despite a bit of a beer gut, I'm reasonably well preserved for a man of my age and drinking habits. I've still got a fine head of hair, even if it is grey. And I may be a bit grizzled and rough-edged, but I've been told I'm not without a certain cuddly quality.

Anyway, in my humble opinion, Santa—in reality Bud Schiller, a retired real estate agent from Kingston, Ontario—was a total asshole. Most people only needed to spend a couple of minutes in his company before heading for the hills. But not these three. Oh no. They laughed at all his jokes; they hung on his every word. Of course, Schiller bought most of the drinks, but I thought his company was a hell of a price to pay for the occasional free beer.

"So, who do you think did it, then, Jack?"

Al French had slipped onto the empty stool beside me. Al was a cross between a loner and a social butterfly. He seemed to know everyone, but like a butterfly, he never lit in any one place for long. He said he was a writer from Rochester, but I've never seen any of his books in the shops. If you ask him to be more specific, he just gets evasive.

Al tipped back his bottle and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He was a skinny little guy with a long nose, slicked-back hair, and a perpetual five-o'clock shadow. Today he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts.

"It was an accident," I said.

"Bullshit. And you know it." Al put his bottle down and whispered in my ear. He sounded as if he'd had a few already. "When a jerk like Bud Schiller dies, there has to be something more behind

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it than mere accident. Come on, buddy, you're supposed to be the private eye."

"True. But I'm on vacation."

"A real gumshoe never rests until he discovers the truth and sees that justice is done."

I rolled my eyes. "Where'd you read that, Al? An old *Black Mask* magazine?"

Al looked hurt. "I didn't read it anywhere. I wrote it."

"You write private-eye stories?"

"We were talking about Bud Schiller's murder."

See what I mean? Evasive. And persistent. I ordered another round of Michelob and offered Al a cigar.

"Cuban?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

Al shrugged and took the cigar. "What they gonna do, huh? Arrest me for smoking?"

I laughed. "Seriously, Al, the cop I talked to said it was an accident. She asked if I'd seen or heard anything unusual, then she left."

"Had you?"

"No."

I wasn't going to tell Al, but I'd spent the evening sitting out in the lanai smoking a cigar, reading Robertson Davies, and working my way through a bottle of Maker's Mark. I could hear the sing-along in the distance, and I remember thinking there was something absurd about a bunch of adults singing "Jingle Bells" and "White Christmas" under the palms, especially with a jerk like Bud Schiller dressed as Santa leading them along. About nine-thirty, when the sing-along ended, the print in my book was too blurred to read anymore, and by ten o'clock or thereabouts, like most people in the Whispering Palms Condominium Estate, I was sawing logs.

"He'd been drinking," I went on. "Mary Pasquale, the girl in the office, she told me he was three sheets to the wind. He must have been carrying his piano away after the party when he tripped near the edge of the pool and pitched in, head first."

Al just raised his eyebrows.

He had a point. Even as I repeated the official line, something nagged at the back of my mind. As an ex-cop turned P.I., I've seen enough weird crime scenes in my time, like the guy they found dead on the subway tracks and couldn't find his head. But in this case, I had to ask myself two questions: First, wouldn't Schiller

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have dropped the piano as he flung his arms out to protect himself from the fall?

And second, perhaps more to the point, why on God's earth was Santa's electric piano *still plugged in?*

"I've noticed you talking to Schiller's cronies," I said to Al quietly, so they wouldn't overhear. "Do you know any of them well enough to think one of them killed him?"

Al shook his head. "Not really. Just casting the nets, you know. Ed Brennan, the red-faced one, he's into the ponies. We went to the dog track at Naples once. But he's a sore loser. Too desperate. And I played golf with Schiller a couple of times a few years back. He cheats. Did you know that?"

I didn't rate cheating at golf as high on my list of motives for murder, but you never knew. "What about the girl?"

Al raised his eyebrows. "Ah-hah! *Cherchez la femme,* is it? Her name's Karen Lee. Kindergarten teacher, I think."

"I wish my kindergarten teacher had looked like that."

"You'd've been too young to appreciate it. Besides, if you've got any thoughts in that direction, Jack, forget them. I warn you, she's strictly an ice queen."

I looked at Karen Lee. She was running her finger around the rim of a tall, frosted glass—abstractedly, rather than in any deliberately erotic way, but it still looked sexy as hell. She sure didn't look like an ice queen to me.

"How long has Schiller been coming here?" I asked.

"Longer than me, and I've been a regular for nine, ten years now."

"How did they all hook up with each other?"

"I don't know, except they're all from Canada. Every year, Schiller would manage to gather a few luckless characters around him, but, like me, they didn't usually come back for more. Ed was the first one who did, about four years ago. The blonde was next, year after, I think, then Mama Cass showed up just last year."

"What's her real name?"

"Ginny Fraser. Three-time loser, far as I can gather. Single mother. Welfare."

"How can she afford to come here?"

"Don't ask me."

"What does Ed do?"

"Retired. Used to be a school caretaker."

Kindergarten teacher; welfare case; retired caretaker. Not exactly high-paying jobs. And all Canadian. Still, that didn't mean much. Half of Canada rents condos in Florida in the winter — and

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Canada's a big country. I looked at them again, trying to read their faces for signs of guilt. Nothing. Karen was still running her finger around her glass rim. Ed was attempting to tell a joke, the kind, he said loudly, that he "just knew old Bud would have appreciated." Only Ginny was laughing, chins wobbling, tears in her eyes.

I finished my beer, said goodbye to Al, and left. When I got back to the condo that evening with a bottle of Chilean wine and a pound of jumbo shrimp for the barbeque, I tried to put Al's suggestion of murder out of my mind.

But it wouldn't go away.

The problem was what, if anything, was I going to do about it? Back home, I'm a licensed private investigator, but down here I'm not even a citizen.

Still, that evening out on the lanai, after the wine and the shrimps, I decided to keep my bourbon intake down. A good night's sleep and no hangover would be the best bet for whatever tomorrow might bring.

The grass pricked my feet as I walked towards the pool the next morning for my pre-breakfast swim. Already the temperature was in the low seventies and the sky was robin's-egg blue.

I stood for a moment on the bridge and looked down into the murky water for the huge turtles and catfish. Evenings, just before dark, I'd got in the habit of feeding them chunks of bread. But there was nobody around this morning.

A couple of hundred yards away, over the swath of dry grass, the squat brown condo units were strung out in a circle around the central island, connected to the mainland by a wooden bridge over the narrow moat. The pool, the office, and the tennis courts were all on the island. And that was Whispering Palms. Someone had bought some land in Florida and got very rich.

An old man, fuzz of white body hair against leathery skin, was lying out on a lounge chair catching the early rays. The scent of coconut sunscreen mingled with the whiff of chlorine. The pool was still marked off by yellow police tape.

I noticed that the office door was ajar, and when I popped my head inside, I saw Mary sitting at her desk, staring into space. I like Mary. She's about twenty-five, an athletic sort of girl with a swimmer's upper body and a runner's thighs. She has a shiny black ponytail and one of those open, friendly faces, the kind you trust on sight.

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"Oh, Mr. Erwin. You startled me. You weren't wanting to use the pool, were you?"

"I was. But I see it's still off limits."

A frown wrinkled Mary's smooth, tanned brow. "Well, I mean, it's not on account of the cops or anything," she said. "It's just . . . well, I didn't think the residents would like it, you know, swimming in a dead man's water." She turned her nose up. "So I've called maintenance and they're gonna clean it out and refill it all fresh. Should be ready by this afternoon. Sorry."

"No, you're right. It's a good idea," I said.

Most people probably *would* be put off by swimming in the same water where an electrocuted Santa Claus had floated around all night alone in the dark, but it didn't bother me much. I had seen death close up more times than I cared to remember. Besides, people swam in the ocean all the time and thousands have died there over the centuries.

"Mary?" I asked. "Do you happen to know who the last people to see Mr. Schiller alive were?"

"His friends. Mr. Brennan, Miss Lee, and Miss Fraser. They said he was fine when they left."

Of course. The ubiquitous trio.

Mary shook her head. "Never could understand what Miss Lee saw in that group, pretty girl like her."

So I was vindicated for thinking exactly the same thing yesterday. And if a young woman like Mary could think it too, it couldn't be either ageist or sexist, could it?

"Mind if *I* ask *you* something?" Mary said with a frown.

"Go ahead."

"Mr. Schiller was a Canadian citizen, right?"

"As far as I know."

"Well, I was worried, you know, like his relatives might come down and make some sort of lawsuit. What do you think?"

Aha, the great American paranoia raises its ugly head: lawsuits. "I'm no legal expert," I said.

"You hear about things like that all the time, don't you? I mean, they could sue for millions. I could be liable. It would ruin me." She laughed. "Even if they sued for hundreds it would bankrupt me. I could lose my job. I need this job, Mr. Erwin. I need the money to go back to school."

I smiled as reassuringly as I could and told her I didn't think that would happen. We didn't even know if Schiller had any next

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of kin, for a start. And she couldn't be responsible for his behavior when he was drunk.

"But the cops said he must have tripped over that crack in the tiles."

"What crack?"

"Come on, I'll show you."

We went outside. The old guy in the lounge chair was still working on his skin cancer. Near the side of the pool, Mary pointed out the crack. It didn't look like much to me. I put my foot in front of it and slid forward slowly. My big toe slipped right over the crack and the rest of my foot followed. I could hardly even feel the rough edge of the tile. "It's hardly enough to trip over," I said to Mary.

"He was wearing flip-flops."

"Santa Claus was wearing flip-flops?"

She nodded.

"I suppose that might make a difference. Even so . . . It's still a long way from the water. Maybe six feet. Schiller was a little guy, only around five-four, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. I thought about that, too. But he must have been walking fast, or running, then he tripped and skidded in. Those tiles can get pretty slippery, especially if they're wet."

"But wouldn't the piano just rip out of the socket?"

Mary shrugged. "It was one of those ultra-light things," she said. "And it had a long cord."

Still, I couldn't help but wonder why the hell Santa Claus should be running *towards* the swimming pool in the dark with a live electric piano in his arms, no matter how tight he was or how light the piano.

A heron landed by the side of the moat. Just for a moment, I felt a slight shiver run up my spine to the hairs at the back of my neck. It was a sign I recognized. I was being watched. And not by the heron or the sunbather.

Mary turned and walked back to the office, sandals clip-clopping against the tiles. I followed her, admiring the way her thigh muscles rippled with each step. I felt strangely detached, though; I could admire the athletic beauty of her body, but I didn't feel attracted to her sexually. But then, it had been a long time since I *had* been attracted to anyone sexually, except maybe Karen Lee.

Mary sat down at her desk again.

"Look," I said, leaning forward and resting my hands on the warm wood, "I know this might sound strange to you, but I'd like

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you to do me a favor without telling anyone or asking too many questions. Do you think you could do that?"

Mary nodded tentatively. "Depends," she said, "on what it is."

When I got back to the condo, it was time for breakfast, but without the swim, my appetite wasn't up to much. I put on a pot of coffee, drank a glass of orange juice, and ate a bowl of high-fiber bran. The healthy life.

Usually I took my second cup out to the lanai and worked on one of the cryptics from the *Sunday Times* book of crosswords. (That was one thing that always annoyed me about American newspapers: You couldn't find a cryptic in any of them I'd seen.) This morning, though, I took the two sheets of paper that Mary had printed out for me.

Okay, so Schiller was alone at the pool after the sing-along, or so Ed, Karen, and Ginny said. Anyone could have gone there in the dark, killed him, and tried to make it look like an accident. And at least three people knew he was there: Ed, Karen, and Ginny. Were they telling the truth?

There was some risk—there always is with murder—but it was minimal. Most of the residents are elderly and they're usually in bed by ten. This isn't like some of the places, where you get kids drinking all night and skinny-dipping; there are no kids at Whispering Palms.

First, I looked over the list of condo owners I had persuaded Mary to print for me.

Schiller's unit was owned on paper by Gardiner Holdings, registered in Grand Cayman Island. If that didn't set alarm bells ringing in an old gumshoe's mind, what would? But I couldn't for the life of me figure out what it meant.

Ginny Fraser's unit was a time-share, though Ginny herself wasn't listed as owning any time.

Ed Brennan's unit was registered to a Dr. Joseph Brady in Waterloo, Canada, and Karen Lee's to a travel agency called EscapeItAll, based in Sarasota.

One way or another, these four had all ended up at Whispering Palms, Fort Myers, Florida, and I was damned if I could see any reason other than pure chance.

So which one of them did it? And why? Or was it someone else?

I pushed my glasses back up the bridge of my nose and reached for the telephone. Being a private investigator from Toronto has *some* advantages in Florida.

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When I'd finished on the phone I felt the need to go out for a drive. Not far. Maybe over the skyway to Sanibel and Captiva. Lunch at the Mucky Duck. Seafood and Harp lager. After all, I was on vacation, whatever Al said about gumshoes and the search for truth and justice.

But when I walked out to the car, I saw Karen Lee bent over the front tire of her red Honda rental just a few parking spots down, white cotton shorts stretched taut over her ass.

I stood and admired the view for a while then walked towards her and asked if she could use any help. Why not? She could only tell me to get lost, that she was perfectly capable of fixing the tire herself. Or she could accept my offer graciously.

She did the latter.

Turning on her haunches and shielding her eyes from the sun, she smiled and said, "Why, thanks, yes. I'd appreciate that." She had dimples at each corner of her mouth. Cute.

Then she stood up and brushed the dust off her hands. She was wearing a pink tank top, and a little sweat had darkened the cotton between her breasts.

"Flat," she said.

A facetious reply formed in my mind, but before I could voice it she went on, "The tire. I should have done something about it last night. I thought something was wrong, maybe a slow leak. But I couldn't be bothered. Then, when I came out today I saw it was flat."

"No problem," I said, and in no time we took off the flat and put on the spare.

"Thanks a lot," said Karen, smiling. "It's not that I'm helpless or anything. I mean, I know how to change a tire. But—"

"Forget it," I told her. "My pleasure."

"What I was going to say was, it was nice to have a bit of company." And she smiled again, giving me the full benefit of her dimples and baby blues. The front of her tank top was even damper now and I could see beads of moisture on the tops of her breasts, between the tiny hairs. She had her hair tied back and fixed with barrettes, but a few strands had come loose and stuck to her flushed face. Some ice queen.

"Hot, isn't it?" she said, waving her hand in front of her face. "Look, why don't you come in and clean up. It's the least I can do."

I could have gone to my own place, just a few buildings down, but I'm no fool. I followed her up the steps to her second-story unit. Inside, it was pretty much the same layout as mine: open-

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plan kitchen and living room, two bedrooms—one with its own bathroom—guest bathroom, and the lanai out front.

"Sorry about the mess," Karen said, picking up a few magazines scattered on the sofa. "I wasn't expecting company. Please go ahead. Use the bathroom."

The bathroom was full of the mysterious paraphernalia of feminine beauty—potions, eyebrow pencils, little sponges, cotton wool, Q-tips. I washed the sweat and grime off my hands and face and flushed the toilet, using the noise to cover up the sound as I went through the drawers and cupboards. There was nothing out of the ordinary: soap, deodorant, shampoo, talcum, tampons, Advil, Maalox. The only interesting item was a bottle of Prozac. These days it seems half the world's on Prozac.

When I got back to the living room, Karen had just finished tidying things into neat piles. She smiled. "Cold drink?"

"A Coke would be great."

"I'll just go freshen up." She looked down at her body and spread her arms, then seemed embarrassed by the gesture. In fact, now we were inside, her manner had grown much more nervous and I didn't know how to put her at ease. Too many movies about the nice guy next door turning out to be a psycho, I suppose.

"I'll help myself," I said. "You go wash up."

"Okay . . . I'll . . . er . . . It's in the fridge. I won't be long. Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"I'll be fine. Don't worry."

When she went into her bathroom, the lock clicked behind her. As soon as I heard the shower start up, I began a quick search, not knowing what the hell I was looking for. If Schiller had been murdered, Karen had to be a suspect. Much as I hoped she hadn't done it, she had been one of the three to know where he was after the sing-along. And how drunk he was.

All I found out was that Karen was halfway through *The Concrete Blonde;* that she more than likely slept alone; that she favored casual clothes but had a couple of expensive dresses; that she didn't seem to watch videos very much; and that her musical tastes extended from Mozart to Alanis Morissette.

When she came out, she was wearing red shorts and a white shirt. Her hair was still damp from the shower and it hung in long hanks, framing her pale oval face.

"There," she said, hoisting herself onto a stool at the kitchen counter. "That's better. What a start to the day."

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I poured her a Coke. "I guess you must still be pretty upset about your friend dying?" I said.

"Bud. Yes. How did you . . . ? Of course. I've seen you in Chloe's, haven't I? Always alone. No wife? Girlfriend?"

A definite hint of flirtation there, I thought. "My wife died three years ago. Auto accident."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That must be terrible."

I shrugged. "There's good days and bad. Were you very close to Mr. Schiller?"

She looked away. "Not really."

"I don't mean to pry or anything," I said, "but were you . . . I mean, what drew you to him?"

"We weren't an item, if that's what you're getting at." She blushed. "I'd just been through a painful divorce. I was depressed. I suppose I came down here to escape. . . . I don't know, I guess maybe I succeeded. Bud and the others, they were my escape. It was all fun. No demands. Bud never took anything seriously."

"You were one of the last people to see him alive, weren't you?"

Karen nodded. "Yes. With Ed and Ginny."

"What happened?"

"We'd all had a bit too much to drink. When everyone else left after the carols, we started joking around by the pool. I fell in. I wanted to go home and change out of my wet clothes, so the three of us came to my place. Bud said he had a couple of things to do, then he was going to turn in."

"Did he say what he had to do?"

"No. Just a couple of things."

"Do you think he could have been meeting someone?"

"I suppose so . . . I . . ." She looked me in the eye. "Why?"

"Just curious. How did he seem?"

"He was very drunk." She frowned, then went on. "You know, I've thought time and time again that we should have done something, that I should have said something."

"Like what?"

"Oh, made him come with us, something like that. Somehow I feel responsible."

"Don't be silly. There's no way you could have known."

"Even so . . . I can't help feeling guilty." She held her hands up. "Look, I don't know how we got into this, but it's a beautiful day out there and I don't want to get even more depressed."

Interview over. "You're right," I said, getting up. "I'd better be going myself."

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She walked me to the door. "Thanks for the help. It was nice talking to you."

"You too." Before she could close the door on me, I turned. "Don't think this too presumptuous of me," I began, "but how would you like to come out for dinner or a drink tonight?"

"Tonight?" Her face dropped. "Oh, I can't. I'm busy."

I started to turn away. "It's okay. I understand. Believe me. My mistake, especially after what you said about the divorce and all. I'm sorry."

But she rested her warm hand on my arm. "It's nothing like that," she said. "I don't want you to think I'm making an excuse. I'm not. I really *do* have something on tonight. The three of us are having a sort of wake. I couldn't miss it."

Maybe this wasn't the brush-off, then. Heart thumping, fear of rejection bringing me out in a sweat, I persevered. "How about tomorrow night then?"

She smiled. "I'd love to. Really, I would."

"Great. Do you like seafood?"

"Sure."

"How about the Big Fin?"

"Fine. Look, I'll meet you at the bar there at seven. I've got some running around to do first, and I'm not sure if I'll have time to get back here. Okay?"

"Fine. Big Fin. Bar. Seven." I walked off grinning like an idiot.

The phone started ringing, the way they do, the minute I stuck my key in the door that afternoon. I put the groceries I'd bought at Publix on the kitchen counter and picked up the extension.

"Jack, it's Mike."

My partner. "You were quick."

"Well, partly it's a slow week."

"And . . . ?"

"And partly there's not a hell of a lot to report."

"Go ahead anyway."

"Nothing on any of the people on the list. Squeaky clean, every one of them."

"What about Schiller?"

"That's the only interesting part. As far as I can make out, nobody knows him. I checked out the Kingston address you gave me. It's owned by a couple called Renard. They confirmed that a man called Schiller rents it from them and the checks come in regularly."

"Where from?"

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"That they wouldn't tell me. Anyway, I got the name of the guy next door to the Schiller place, and he said the house is empty most of the time."

Now what the hell did that mean? "Anything else?"

"That doctor in Waterloo, Joseph Brady, he checks out. He's Edward Brennan's family doctor, has been for years, and he rented the condo to Ed for the first time a few years back. Apparently the poor guy needed to recuperate from some illness—nothing specific, you know doctors—but I got the impression this Ed character had suffered various health problems on and off over—"

"Mental or physical?"

"Can't say. But the guy's a family doctor, Jack, not a shrink."

"Okay. Go on."

"So it was a kind of convalescent holiday. He liked it and kept coming back."

"How about EscapeItAll?"

"Perfectly legit. They own a few condos down the Gulf Coast and rent them through local agencies. Quite a lot of the Toronto travel agents do business with them, and the ones I talked to said they never had any problems."

"And the time-share?"

"Also legit. There is one thing, though. Virginia Fraser, one of the names you gave me?"

"Right." Ginny Fraser.

"I talked to the woman she rented from, and it turns out that the dates Fraser got weren't available originally."

"So?"

"So she paid over the odds."

"Ah-hah. On welfare, too. Is that all?"

"Just about. Gardiner Holdings, that company in the Caymans? Looks like it's the front of a front of a front. I couldn't get even a whiff of the real movers and shakers behind it."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks a lot, Mike. You did good work." Then I hung up and mulled over what I'd learned.

"Gee, I dunno, Mr. Erwin. I really shouldn't be doing this," Mary said when she found the right key.

"It'll have to be cleaned out, anyway," I said.

"Yeah, I know. It's just . . . Still, you *are* a licensed private investigator, right?"

"Right. And maybe we can check on next of kin, make sure no one's gonna come down and file a lawsuit against you." I hated

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pressuring her that way, but I had to get inside Schiller's condo if I was to get any further. I was now more or less convinced that someone—either one of his three pals or someone he had arranged to meet—had gone to the pool and murdered him. It would help if I could find out whether he had anything to hide.

Still biting her lip, Mary turned the key in the lock.

Schiller certainly traveled light. A quick search of the master bedroom revealed only warm-climate clothes and a tattered Tom Clancy paperback on the bedside table. No papers in the drawers, no photographs, nothing. The cops must have taken his passport. The bathroom held only what a single man's bathroom would, and the guest bedroom was empty except for the bed, stripped down to its mattress. Kitchen and fridge contained the usual—milk, bread, condiments, a couple of TV dinners, cutlery, booze. By the looks of it, Schiller ate out a lot.

In the living room, the stereo, TV, and VCR took up one corner. A cabinet under the VCR held a stock of tapes. One of the movies was from a local rental store, and it was overdue by two days. The tape was still in the machine.

"I'll take this back tomorrow," I said to Mary, casually slipping the tape back in the box.

Mary just nodded and glanced nervously at the door.

"I think that's about all," I said, "if you want to go now."

Mary was out the front door like a shot. "You didn't find anything about next of kin?"

"Nothing. No news is good news. Don't worry."

She flashed an anxious smile. "I'll try not to."

And I hurried back to call the courier company. It was late, but with luck, they could get a package to Mike overnight.

"Jack?"

"Uh-huh."

"Mike."

"Hang on . . . Just a minute. . . ." I sat up quickly. It felt like I had to drag myself a long way back from God knew where. I rubbed my eyes and checked my watch. Three-thirty in the afternoon. I must have dozed off after lunch. I opened the fridge and popped the tab on a can of Michelob, then picked up the phone again. "Yeah, go ahead, Mike. Sorry about that."

"No problem. I took the prints you got from that cassette down to Ident first thing this morning. Harry found a match."

"Schiller's got a record?"

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"Not Schiller. The prints belong to a Sherman Smith."

"That rings a bell."

"It should," he went on. "Remember that land scam twenty years ago? Smith defrauded hundreds of people out of their life savings."

"What was it, some land in Florida turned out to be swamp?"

"Something like that. Smith disappeared with the money and was never seen or heard of again. In all, there must've been over two million bucks."

I whistled. "What happened?"

"The Mounties followed the paper trail for a while, then they lost it. Smith never surfaced again."

Except as Schiller, I thought. He probably split his time between Florida and the Cayman Islands, traveling on a phony Canadian passport but not staying in Canada for long. Too risky. "Do we recognize any of the victims' names?" I asked Mike.

I could almost hear him grinning over the phone. "I thought you'd never ask. As a matter of fact, we do: a Mr. Edward Brennan."

Karen was sitting at a stool at the bar sipping something colorful and cluttered through a candy-striped straw. She was wearing a green silk off-the-shoulder number, one I had seen in her closet, with her legs crossed. I caught an eyeful of slim, tanned thigh as I walked towards her. She smiled and said hello. Her shiny blond hair fell over her shoulder on one side, and she had tucked the other side behind her ear, fixing it there with a pink flower that matched her lipstick. Nice touch.

I must admit I'd been relieved to find out it was Ed who had the connection with Smith, not Karen. It didn't mean he was the killer, of course, but it sure gave him one hell of a motive. I still had a lot of questions for Karen, though, and I wasn't sure how, or if, I could mix business and pleasure.

I ordered a bourbon on the rocks and we walked through to the table. It was a tacky-looking kind of restaurant, with nets hanging from the ceilings and old barrels converted into chairs, but the food was always superb.

Karen examined the menu, then she said, "I'd like to start with some oysters. How about you?"

"Fine by me." Oysters! For an ice queen? Maybe Al French had an agenda of his own? We ordered a dozen oysters and a bottle of California champagne, followed by swordfish steak for me and coquilles St. Jacques for Karen. She avoided my eyes as the waiter lit candles on the table.

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We chatted about this and that. Karen seemed nervous, on edge, attention all over the place, so much so that she seemed skittish. But just when I thought I'd lost her, she'd look me in the eye and come back with the kind of remark that showed she was there all the time, maybe even a step or two ahead.

"Did you know Bud, Ed, or Ginny back home?" I asked, when the subject came around to last night's wake.

She shook her head. "One rule about a world you escape to is that neither it nor any of its inhabitants can exist in the world you regularly live in." She fingered the napkin ring on the table as she spoke, shadows flitting in the depths of her eyes.

"I can understand that," I said, thinking it sounded like something out of a computer-game manual. The oysters arrived and we helped ourselves. "I suppose it's an escape for me too."

"Is it? In what way?"

"I used to come down here every year with my wife."

Karen frowned. "Then it's not an escape you're after," she said. "It's *catharsis.*"

"Maybe you're right. If so, it hasn't happened yet."

She put her hand lightly on mine. "Give it time, Jack. Give it time."

We finished the oysters, and the main courses arrived. I tried to find a way to steer the conversation back to Bud Schiller. As usual, I couldn't find a subtle way, so halfway through my swordfish, during a temporary lull, I said, "Remember when you told me the three of you went to your room and Bud stayed out by the pool?"

She nodded. "And you thought he might be meeting someone?"

"That's right. Did the others leave your room at any time?"

"Not until later." She blushed. "Ed must have passed out there. I found him on the couch in the morning."

"Did Ed ever mention knowing Bud from before?"

Karen looked down at her plate and speared a scallop. "No." Then she looked back at me and her eyes widened. "What are you suggesting? That Ed murdered Bud? You can't be serious?"

"I don't know, Karen. I'm just curious, that's all."

"But why? Why are you interested? Are you a cop?"

"I'm a private investigator," I told her, "but I'm not licensed to operate down here." I shrugged. "It just seemed suspicious to me, that's all."

I paused for a moment, then I jumped right in and told her about Schiller's true identity and the land scam in which one Edward Brennan lost his life's savings. When I finished, Karen was pale. She excused herself to visit the washroom.

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When she came back, she looked a lot better. She didn't wear much makeup, but she had given herself a fresh coat of the basics and looked good as new.

"I'm sorry for overreacting," she said. "Honestly, I'd never really considered that Bud's death could have been deliberate. I suppose I was too busy blaming myself. But Ed . . . ?"

"I can't be sure," I said. "But it doesn't look good. Are you certain he never left your condo?"

"He went over to his own unit to pick up some Scotch. I'd run out. But he wasn't gone for more than ten minutes."

"Ten minutes was enough."

"What are you going to do?"

"Tell the authorities, I suppose."

She nodded slowly. "That would be the right thing to do, of course. But poor Ed. I don't like the thought of him spending the rest of his life in jail. Can't you just . . . you know . . . let it go?"

"However much of a jerk Bud Schiller was, he didn't deserve to die like that."

"You're right," she whispered. "Will you take me home?"

As I followed Karen's Honda back to Whispering Palms I was beginning to think that I'd blown my chances of a pleasant end to the evening. But she invited me up for a nightcap.

Once we were inside, she busied herself preparing the drinks, flitting nervously between fridge and cocktail cabinet, chattering brightly away. Ever since we got back, I'd sensed a certain tension between us and I thought it was sexual. When she walked past me to open the sliding glass door to the lanai, I put my hand out and touched her shoulder. She turned, gave me a swift peck on the cheek, and said she had to go to the bathroom.

I gazed out at the dark island beyond the lanai, at the Christmas lights on the bridge, drink in hand, waiting for her. What did the peck on the cheek mean? Was it promise or consolation? You're an old fool, Jack Erwin, I told myself. You should stick to your bourbon and blues.

Then I heard a door open behind me. Thinking it was Karen coming back, I turned around.

Ed Brennan stood there, a baseball bat in his hands.

Before I had time to react, the front door opened and Ginny Fraser walked in carrying a long kitchen knife.

Karen came out of the bathroom. She wasn't carrying any weapon and she looked as if she had been crying. "Oh, Jack," she said, shaking her head. "I'm so sorry."

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"What are you going to do?" I asked, trying to sound more confident than I felt. "Hit me on the head with the baseball bat then stab me and pretend it was an accident? Just to protect Ed here? Come on, Karen, he's not worth it."

"You don't understand," Karen said. "You think you know everything but you don't. You don't know anything."

My breath caught in my throat. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Then a strange thing happened. I saw Karen flash a quick, sad glance at Ed, and Ed just seemed to deflate right before my eyes. His baseball bat dropped to the floor. "He's right, Karen," he said. "We can't do this. We're not killers."

I looked at Ginny Fraser. She dropped the kitchen knife and flopped onto the sofa.

After I got my breath back, I turned to Karen and said, "Right, now we've got that charade out of the way, will someone tell me what's going on here?"

"I'm sorry," Ed said for the third time. "I don't know what came over us. We were desperate. I still can't imagine what made us think we could kill an innocent man. When Karen phoned from the restaurant and told us you knew . . . we just panicked."

"I'm sorry I deceived you," Karen said. "I admit I was trying to find out if you knew anything. After I saw you and the woman from the office looking at the pool yesterday, I thought you might be trouble. So I arranged the puncture."

Well, that makes two of us acting from impure motives, I thought. "So you're all sorry," I said. "Whoop-a-de-doo-dah. Now would someone tell me why I shouldn't call the police right now?"

"We can't stop you," Ed said. "We *won't* stop you. In a way, it would be a relief."

I poured three fingers of Karen's bourbon into my glass and settled down on the sofa beside Ginny. Karen and Ed sat opposite in matching easy chairs. "Just tell me what it's all about," I said. "Who really did kill Schiller?"

"We all did," Ed answered.

I looked at Karen and Ginny, who both nodded. Jesus Christ, I thought, it's *Murder on the Orient Express* all over again.

"Ginny and I pushed him into the pool," Ed went on. "He thought we were playing games. Karen plugged in the piano, and we all lowered it in after him. After that all we had to do was lie to the police and tell them he was still alive when we left him."

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"What I really don't understand," I went on, "is why. I know Smith cheated Ed out of his life's savings, but what did he ever do to you, Karen?"

"My father," she said flatly. "Vernon Connant. You'll find *his* name on your list. Lee's my married name. Smith swindled him out of every penny we had. When the news broke, he killed my mother, then himself. With a shotgun. I was five at the time. Just before he put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger, he looked at me. He was going to kill me, too, but at the last moment, he couldn't do it. I'll never forget that look. I've spent my whole life trying, one shrink after another, pills, the lot. You can't tell me that Sherman Smith didn't deserve to die."

I took a long sip of bourbon and let the fire fill my mouth before swallowing. "What about you, Ginny? You weren't on the list, either."

"My husband. Harvey Pellier. I went back to my maiden name."

"What happened?"

Ginny gave a harsh laugh. "Nothing quite so dramatic as Karen's story. Harvey lost everything, and it broke his spirit. He left us. Just walked out and never came back. We hadn't been really well off, but we'd been happy. When Harvey left, the family fell apart. I couldn't hold it together. The kids did badly at school, started hanging with a bad crowd. You know the sort of thing. They drifted into drugs, street life. Will died of an overdose. Jane's still somewhere out on the streets. I haven't heard from her in years."

After a few moments of silence, Ed ran his hands through his hair and said he wouldn't mind a drink. Karen got him a Scotch on the rocks. Then he began. "I bumped into Smith about four years ago. Pure chance. Coincidence. I just couldn't believe it. I suppose, when you think about it, you never know who's going to be renting from who. Anyway, I saw him, after over fifteen years, and do you know what?"

I shook my head.

"He didn't recognize me. I mean, you ought to recognize people whose lives you ruined, don't you think? Because of him I had a nervous breakdown, I got hooked on the booze, lost job after job. You name it." He thumped his chest with his fist. "Then, when I began to relive what he'd done to me, I realized the anger was still there. Only now I had the advantage. But I couldn't kill him. Not alone." He glanced at Karen and Ginny. "When it first happened—I mean twenty years ago—lots of us had meetings with lawyers, and I became close to Karen's father and Ginny's

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husband. But Smith had never seen Karen or Ginny. So I got in touch with them, told them the situation, and we planned what to do. We befriended him, one by one, pretended we didn't know each other, then we killed him."

Ed fell silent and the others looked at me. It was hard to imagine the havoc Sherman Smith had wreaked on these lives, hard not to sympathize with the three of them, but who was I to judge?

"It's up to you now, Jack," Karen said, seeming to sense my dilemma. "You know the whole story now. We're guilty of premeditated murder." She glanced at Ed. "If you want my honest opinion, I don't think it's helped any of us. I don't think it's going to make our lives any easier to bear—probably the opposite—but it's done and you're the only one who knows about it. We can't kill you, but we're not going to give ourselves up willingly, either. It's your decision."

So whether I liked it or not, it *was* up to me. I finished my bourbon, then I nodded and went back to my condo.

Almost exactly one year to the day later, I found myself in Chloe's for Happy Hour. There were one or two faces I recognized around the bar, but most of the people were strangers. I still didn't know why I kept coming back year after year. Especially this year. Maybe Karen had been right and I *was* looking for catharsis.

Or for Karen.

I looked across the bar at where I had first really noticed her last year, running her finger around the rim of a glass. Now a chain-smoking brunette with a hard face sat there instead.

"Hi, shamus."

Al French slipped onto the empty stool beside me.

"Beer?" I offered.

"My turn." Al ordered two beers. "Did you ever get to the bottom of that mysterious death?" he asked.

"Which one was that?"

"You know. Last year. That jerk Bud Schiller."

"Oh, him." I shook my head. "I don't think there was anything mysterious about it at all. I think he was drunk, he tripped, and he fell into the pool."

"Yeah, and he pulled the piano in after him just for good measure. Come on, Jack."

I shrugged. "You know, Al, sometimes the strangest of accidents *do* happen. Did I ever tell you about the guy they found dead on the subway tracks and couldn't find his head?" ●

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Star of the Silver Screen

by Janice Law

A writer of both mainstream and mystery novels, Janice Law only rarely takes time out for a short story. The following piece, written alongside her work in progress—her eighth Anna Peters private eye novel—tips its hat at film noir. Ms. Law is a resident of Hampton, Connecticut.

He'd promised to kill her if she ever left him—and she believed him absolutely. When he'd first whispered it to her over drinks at expensive restaurants or amidst the sexy rumble of the dance floor, she'd interpreted his declaration as love, as devotion, as need. She'd been flattered and reassured; he'd seemed so strong, so passionate and determined.

Now she knew better. Ben knew little about love and nothing about devotion. What he knew about was need and power and control, and he'd known so much about those that he'd gone from an underfed kid selling handfuls of pills and bags of crack to one of the biggest men in the Northeast. Big enough so that he handled the money end, the organization end; big enough so that the "product" could have been anything: electronics, imported fabrics, luxury cars, or—his usual response when folks who didn't know better asked what he did—fine imported wines.

That was a laugh, she thought. Where Ben came from a "fine wine" was an unopened bottle of Thunderbird. But he did know a lot about vintages. He was always impressive, the way he could talk about the bouquet and the palate and the fruity blush while the big spenders and society types nodded their heads and raised him a notch with every word. Oh, she'd often watched him in

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action. First, when she was dazzled by him, and later, when she was scared; either way, she had to admit Ben was smart. He was the smartest man she'd ever met, and every time she thought about that, she gave a little shiver. He said he'd kill her and she believed him—absolutely.

She'd hoped—which shows what kind of a fool she'd been—she'd hoped that getting so far from "the product" would change him. That the skinny kid who'd become the glamorous and wealthy man would keep changing, and that somehow the underpinnings—the sordid overkill and cruelty and stupidity of street life—would vanish, presto!, and they could be left with all the things she liked: the city apartment, the country house, parties with musicians, platinum credit cards, Mercedes and Jaguars and private jets. Like Ben, she'd developed her tastes. She'd toned down the flash and bought quality. And if Ben complained a dress was "too plain," she loaded up with jewelry, with beautiful, flawless stones in handsome settings, good as money in the bank any day, because Ben had been very generous.

In the beginning, she'd accepted his presents as love. When he grew more difficult and distant, she extracted them as payment, wages due for slaps and curses, for violent scenes and humiliating demands. Finally, when she ceased to feel anything for him but fear, she bought jewelry for herself, quietly siphoning cash from the almost unspendable money stream that seeped through their lives.

So, all considered, she couldn't exactly say she was unprepared, though she did stay on too long. The bottom line, of course, was his whispered, shouted threat, but there were other distractions, too: trips, cars, furs, jewels; fabulous parties, new clothes, new houses, new rooms, new apartments. Time can be filled up if you only have money, and even when she found herself needing more and more to fill up less and less time, "the product" provided.

She had no real scruples about that. Like a lot of people, she was selectively unimaginative, and she did not find it too great a strain to block out speculations on the overall cost of doing business. She could have been happy—she realized that later—she could have been happy as a permanent thing if Ben hadn't started drinking. Well, not really drinking, but it sounded nicer to say "drinking." What Ben really did was to become better acquainted with "the product."

That was when she began to be afraid of him, of his sudden

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rages, his sly paranoia and violent accusations. That was when she began to be afraid of losing everything, not just the swank parties and designer clothes, not just leather seats and satin spreads and damask linen, but herself, her identity. She'd vanished into luxury. She'd thought she'd been growing and developing, but had she? She'd become the woman who lived at the Château Blanc, who ate in certain restaurants, shopped at certain stores, traveled in certain circles, and appeared at certain parties. That's who she was, and who would she be without the Gucci shoes, the Ferragamo scarves, the Chanel accessories? She wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

But he said, "I'll kill you," and she believed him because of one night when they were up late in their elegant black and white kitchen. She was heating water for a cup of tea; he was drinking an expensive old whiskey. She had spent the evening watching *Pretty Woman* on video; he had been out with old friends, "product" friends, and he was coming down from strenuous partying, when, without warning—that was the terrible thing—without any warning at all, he spun into a rage and, knocking the pan from the stove, forced both her hands onto the burner.

The next day, he brought her orchids in the hospital. Live, potted orchids that would later flourish in their professionally maintained greenhouse. And bunches of lilies and roses in a crystal vase and a magnificent jeweled evening bag shaped like Humpty Dumpty that was too heavy for her scorched hands to hold. But he did not say that he was sorry. It was as if he hadn't done anything at all, as if the maniac in the kitchen had been some other Ben, some other man altogether. When she realized that, she became really frightened and understood at last that she had to leave.

All the while her hands were healing, she made elaborate, obsessive plans, but she lacked energy to put them into action until the day Ben frightened her again. Overwhelmed by terror, she ran to the safe for her jewelry case as soon as he went out. The minute she had it in her hands, she knew she'd decided, and became calm. She marveled about that later; about how you can get through terror to the other side, like stepping out of a dark, cramped elevator into a big, well-lighted foyer.

She laid the jewelry case on her bed and went into Ben's office, where she rooted through the closet for the heavy leather bag she knew was stashed at the back. She hauled it out, fetched a knife from the kitchen, and forced the catch.

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Inside, the casino chips sat in neat plastic boxes, rows and rows and rows of them, red, white, and black, with satisfyingly large denominations stamped on their shiny faces. She transferred the whole lot to a suitcase, replacing them with some heavy cans to make up the weight, and returned Ben's leather bag to his closet. She changed her clothes, loaded the cases into her pretty silver Mercedes, and drove out the gates of the Château Blanc without looking back.

It was foggy the whole way to the casino. That's what she remembered afterwards: the ghostly, foggy night with haloed lights and mysterious white voids, and Ben's voice in her ear every minute saying, "I'll kill you if you ever leave me." When she reached the gambling palace—all flash and lights and aggressive architecture—they knew her, of course. How often had she come in on Ben's arm to watch him at the tables, to bring him luck at blackjack or to be bored off her feet at poker or roulette? The manager hustled out immediately, obsequious in his tuxedo, to insist that she wait in his office. He offered her coffee and a liqueur and small green cigars while they cut the cashier's check.

Meanwhile, she was like a woman in a dream; she marveled at air so smoky it was visible, a palpable veil irradiated by the fluorescents, and gazed at the banks of monitors, the dozens of watchful eyes that were the visible sign of their suspicion. They might call Ben, she thought, they might call security; instead, a clerk came back carrying a negotiable check with a lot of digits. She slipped it into her purse, thanked the manager, and distributed lavish tips.

The manager personally escorted her to the garage, where he helped with the door of the Mercedes and shook her hand—still tender under her glove. Then she was off down the road, disappearing, literally, into the fog. She had no recollection of where she had driven next or where she had left the Mercedes. Presumably at the airport, but maybe at a bus station. Or Amtrak. She only knew that she'd somehow gotten rid of the car and transferred herself to a Manhattan hotel, where she became aware that she was watching a movie on television.

For quite a while, the movie was more real than the room—some sort of suite; than herself—dressed in an unfamiliar pair of jeans and a cashmere sweater; than Manhattan—an implausible rumble punctuated by horns and sirens. The black and white film provided entrance to a simpler, more comprehensible universe.

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The soft gray tones did not jangle her nerves like the violent colors of everyday life, where sullen purples, whining citrons, furious reds, and poison greens burned her eyes and made her head ache.

She loved the movie's effortless elegance. The sheen of a streetlight on a bulbous black sedan, the smooth silver and gray patterns of a woman's face, the jagged lights and darks of a man's profile: This was a code that she could read; this was a message for her alone.

And she studied it devoutly, recognizing her story in its hackneyed plot of desire, betrayal, and revenge; reading her fate in the click of high heels, the acceleration of a car, the tense confusion of shots and phones and alarms. But her particular study was the heroine, a tall, straight, beautiful woman, calm and clever, with a lethal snub-nosed pistol and an amazing suit. The jacket started with wide shoulders, narrowed to a fitted waist, then belled into a peplum. The skirt was long and gently flaring. With this outfit, the heroine wore dark high heels, a neat, smart hat, gloves—she could have wept with relief when she saw the nearly elbow-length gloves—and carried a little purse, dainty, but sturdy. Sometimes the heroine added a scarf, sometimes a fur; whatever the accessories, the look was always elegant and efficient.

Stranded in her unfamiliar hotel room, she saw at once how it all added up; she understood the way it worked—even the old-fashioned stockings with their seams. How she admired the discipline of those two straight lines, sure signs of resolve and invulnerability. If she only had stockings like those, if she only had such a suit! Resolve and invulnerability were precisely what she needed, and there, in front of her, was the identity that would provide them. She need only become that straight, beautiful woman to leave the Technicolor world behind.

The first thing, clearly, was that magic ensemble, that emblem of another dimension. As soon as the film ended, she called Bloomingdale's and then Saks. Finally, she obtained something almost right, good enough so that when the boxes were delivered and the clothes spread out on the bed, she felt safe. She felt that she could go out and do the practical things she knew must be done: deposit the check, open an account, sell her jewelry, find an apartment, destroy her credit cards. Start, in short, a new life and obliterate all traces of her former existence.

Later on, after she was settled in a small East Side apartment, she found a dressmaker, a witch woman who understood clothing

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and armaments and who made exactly what she wanted: a suit with wide shoulders, fitted waist, soutache braid collar and pocket detail, a peplum, and a long, slightly flared skirt. She had it made up in gray. But although that was the screen color, the shade did not translate as well, she thought, to real life. The second version, in taupe, was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

The blouse was to be cream, and they had a struggle with that. Polyester was out of the question, and modern silk, the dressmaker said, lacked body. She agreed, they were in perfect harmony, but, in the meantime, she felt worried and nervous and hesitated to go out. Fortunately, the dressmaker was resourceful; she found some Chinese silk for warm weather and, for winter, an antique satin, as heavy and smooth as the finest ice cream.

The minute she put the whole ensemble on, the blouse, the jacket with the shoulder pads, the flared skirt, the high heels, the hat—oh, what troubles they'd had with the hat, too!—she knew she was safe.

There remained only the gloves, the last detail. She had to search the city for them, through the big department stores, the little boutiques, the luxury importers and vintage stores and flea markets and discounts, because it was not just finding the right style or the right shade. It was finding the perfect gloves, perfect for her purposes, that is; gloves that would complete the costume, that would slide over her damaged hands and take her from the shocks and terrors of reality to the perfect silver shimmer of another dimension.

Success came unexpectedly in a little out-of-the-way leather shop. Imagine a spring day, sunny and cool, with the street smell of exhaust and combustion sweetened by the florists' tulips and lilies blooming in their galvanized display cans. The old man at the counter lifted his head when she walked in and, instantly, she felt serene. She knew before he opened the drawer that she would find what she'd been looking for, and there they lay: elbow length gloves of the palest bluish gray calfskin. She bought a dozen pairs and, with them, the freedom of the city. Now that her transformation was complete, she found it possible to walk in the nearby park, to shop at the grocery, to browse along the antique shops and the flower stands, to rent movies at the video shop.

Naturally, she was always on the alert for "her" film, for that special, nameless, half-magical, half-imaginary movie she had watched so raptly in that strange Manhattan hotel, but it proved

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elusive. Though she consulted catalogues and books and went uptown to the museums and downtown to the university whenever there were special showings, the tall, resolute woman with the beautiful, enigmatic face never reappeared. She had to be content with echoes in other films: a hint in the music or in the line of a dress, a snatch of snappy dialogue, or a sudden, dangerous moment in a city night.

On these forays, she got around the Technicolor city by cab, always alone, trusting her costume to inform others who might interrupt her, solicit her, or threaten her that she was not resident in their world. She was a visitor from another dimension, following her own, inviolate script.

As time went on, as she was shaped more and more by her new life, she added other ritual protections to her costume. She shopped daily at the same stores, planned the same menus for each week, bought the same papers and magazines. She paid for everything in cash or with cashier's checks. To the shopkeepers, to the neighbors, she commented on the weather and said "Good morning" or "Good afternoon," but she never mentioned her name, never revealed her address, never let slip the slightest personal detail.

This caution was advisable, because she knew he'd be looking for her, but it sprang less from fear than from her adaptation to life in another dimension. As long as she followed her script, as long as she was in character and in costume, she felt invisible. Nothing could harm her. Not even Ben.

A year went by, two years. She might have made new friends, she might have gone to another city and started over more or less openly. She might have obtained new documents, secured a court order, taken any of a number of conventional steps. But more and more the Technicolor world seemed alien to her, alien, erratic, and violent. She was quite happy where she was.

Mr. Silverbaum was the first to warn her, old Mr. Silverbaum, who lived on the sixth floor and exchanged courtly "Good mornings" with her when he went out to walk his elderly schnauzer. There had been someone in the hall, he told her in his light Viennese accent, just the previous night. He'd heard a sound and opened the door, expecting his sister who lived in Jersey, and there was a stranger, a man in a dark coat. He'd complained in the strongest terms to the management and to Tommy, the doorman, too.

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She listened sympathetically, but being invisible, she was not personally concerned. The Silverbaums were a different matter: Elderly antique collectors, they were wealthy enough to be a target for savvy thieves or desperate addicts.

"You were quite right," she said. "You were quite right to complain."

"Of course, of course," he said. "But Madame Cee"—with his fine European manners, Mr. Silverbaum had taken the initials on her door and christened her "Madame Cee"—"it is for you I was really alarmed. A woman alone. I said that to Tommy: I said, 'You must be especially careful for Madame Cee.'"

She thanked him and smiled. "I am always careful about opening my door," she said.

She told Tommy the same thing later in the week when he raised the matter. "Mr. Silverbaum told me about the intruder," she said.

Tommy shook his head. "I don't know if it's the same guy that was on Mr. Silverbaum's floor, but Joey's seen someone around back. He called the police twice last week. Well, you know how much that's worth. But I'm keeping my eyes open. I just wanted you to know that. Plus I'm checking the service door regular, but still . . ."

"I'm always careful," she said. She could have reminded him that she got no mail, received no visitors, took no chances. It was not, in any case, a matter of concern. The city was full of thieves, full of the deranged, the homeless. There were plenty of explanations, and she had no intention of changing her routine.

She went out every morning for her papers and for either a bagel or a danish at the little bakery on the corner. She bought flowers twice a week at a flower stand down on Third and shopped for chicken, pork chops, and pasta at the neighborhood Italian market. She always dressed the same way and carried her small, surprisingly heavy purse in one hand, a string bag for her shopping in the other.

She was so regular in her habits that she'd become, in a minor way, a feature of the neighborhood. "The lady in the suit" or "the lady wearing the hat," or, most often, "the lady with the gloves." The shopkeepers all knew her and the doormen, too, and when friends or out-of-town relatives visited, the locals would nod their heads at her across the street and remark, "There she goes, the

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lady with the gloves; we see her every day," and think no more about her.

But should she change her routine, deviate from her route, rewrite her script, there would surely be trouble. The universe would take notice that she had rejoined the Technicolor world where everything was uncertain and violent. She would become visible again, exposed and defenseless.

Besides, she'd taken her own precautions. She'd ordered another suit made—there had been some trouble getting just the right fabric last time and she'd had the dressmaker lay in an extra supply—and also some lightweight fabric gloves for summer in the same pale blue-gray as the calfskin. She had Tommy escort her upstairs if she was out at a late movie and began to ask the dispatcher for cab drivers she knew. That was only sensible.

But perhaps she was more disturbed than she appeared, for she began to be troubled by dreams. These, while superficially innocuous, proved deeply disturbing. In them she was always rushed for some reason, hurrying out of her apartment and onto the street only to discover that some article of clothing was missing: She'd forgotten her hat, perhaps, or her jacket, or—worst yet—her gloves. Or else she was wearing what she thought of as ordinary clothes—pants, a sweater, a dress—and felt naked and vulnerable. Because of these dreams, she began to dress with extraordinary care and to check her appearance carefully in the hall mirror any time she ventured out.

That's where she was when the knock came at the door. She had just finished her inventory, hat, gloves, purse, when she heard the sound and froze. The only people who ever knocked on her door were Tommy and Mr. Silverbaum. But Tommy always called first, and old Mr. Silverbaum, who understood her anxieties without ever being told, would even now be calling through the door, "Madame Cee, Madame Cee?" so that she would know there was no reason for concern. She knew this was not Mr. Silverbaum.

When she looked through the peephole, she saw the man in the dark coat, the man Mr. Silverbaum had seen, the man who had been hanging around the back of the building. Just for a moment, she smiled. Maybe his detectives had found her, but Ben had had to come himself. It pleased her that he would be disappointed; he would never have expected her to escape into another dimension.

She smoothed her hair, touched her hat, and picked up her bag.

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Then she unlocked the door and looked into his strange, dark, obsessive eyes.

"Yes?" she said.

It bothered him, she could see that, it bothered him that she was not frightened, that she was calm, that she was indifferent.

His hands were bunched in his pockets; his black coat had a purplish sheen; there was red behind his eyes. Ben definitely belonged to the Technicolor world where she had no intention of returning.

"I told you I'd find you," he said. "I told you, didn't I? Do you remember what I told you?" His voice rising, he thrust out his hand and shoved her back into the apartment, the apartment in pale silvery and beige tones, where the tall, straight, beautiful woman said, "What do you want, Ben?"

His face was all darks and lights, a craggy, violent pattern. His body was a dark shape against the pale wall and his angular shadow slipped across the rug.

"I told you I'd kill you if you ever left me," he said. "I'd kill you anyway for stealing those chips."

He had a knife in his pocket, a gleaming silver streak that leapt from the dark fabric of his coat. The jagged patterns shuddered and rearranged themselves, and the shot, when it came, was startlingly loud, so loud it echoed along the floor and up a flight and reverberated through the Silverbaums' dining room, so that they stopped drinking their morning coffee to call down for Tommy.

When he got there, the door was open and the hallway smelled of meat and gunpowder. A man was lying in the foyer with blood on his chest and a knife in his hand.

"He didn't know," she said. She was dressed just as she always was, in the same suit and blouse and hat and high heels, holding the same little, surprisingly heavy purse. She opened it now, and held it out so that Tommy could see the pistol. Quite an antique, as far as he could tell, but up to the job, that's for sure, because the man gave a groaning cough and died.

She made the slightest motion of her head, then the tall, straight, beautiful woman walked across the room to the phone and punched in the numbers. Her voice was low and throaty, a voice for dreams, for memories, for alternative dimensions.

"You'd better send a squad car," she said. "I've just killed a man." ●

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1996 EQMM READERS AWARD

It's Readers Award time again, and your vote is needed. Every working day of the year the staff of *EQMM* directs its energies to providing hair-raising suspense for readers. Here's your chance to do the same for us! The more votes we receive in the 1996 Readers Award competition, the greater will be the pleasurable frisson of suspense in *EQMM*'s offices as the ballot deadline nears. We get a thrill out of hearing from you, and so do the hundreds of authors whose stories appear periodically in these pages.

From the early days of mystery fiction, when Conan Doyle was persuaded to continue the adventures of Sherlock Holmes at the insistence of readers of *The Strand,* reader response has served as a spur to writers. In a small way, every reader can play a part in shaping the future of crime fiction by voting for the *EQMM* Readers Award, for many of the stories you see in this magazine are experiments with new characters and situations by authors with worldwide reputations. They await your verdict on their efforts just as *EQMM*'s editors do. Don't miss your chance to take part in determining the winners in this annual mystery event!

The rules for 1996, the twelfth year of the competition, are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner. All stories published in *EQMM* in 1996 are eligible for the award.

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Please refresh your memory of the year's selections by referring to the index on pages 156-158 before marking your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 1996 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1997 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-size stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1996 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

RAINING HELL

by Jack Terry

The phone rang in Joyce's mind but her memory refused to answer. She turned the television volume up to drown it out. They would not stop showing the disaster. The footage rolled on every station, grainy unsteady chaotic pictures of twisted metal, smoldering rubble, and choking smoke. The grass burned where the flaming debris had hit, and the green hills were pockmarked with fires.

One station showed the body of a cow crushed beneath some debris. Its body was contorted, its backbone pulverized by the burning slag that hit it like a missile.

They had the decency not to show footage of the human casualties, but they talked about them. A farmer had been killed in the field with his cow. A family had burned to death in their home. Fiery debris had struck a church and sent the stone walls toppling onto a group of children in the yard. They would not stop talking about it. They would not stop.

Exhausted, Joyce rested her face in her hands and bit her lip to hold back the tears. She stabbed the Off button on the remote control and sat back, trying hard to let the silence calm her. After a

From a high-tech software engineer like Jack Terry, who specializes by day in network management, we might have expected a first work filled with lots of technical detail. Instead, the author has written about a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. Mr. Terry lives in Nottingham, New Hampshire with his wife and two sons. "Raining Hell" is his first published fiction. ¶

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moment, she went to the bathroom and splashed her face with cold water. She buried herself in the plush cloth of the hotel towel and trembled in an effort to contain her emotions. She fought back the agony chills that swam through her body and she carefully pulled herself back from the precipice of the void. When she felt strong enough, she went back to the main room and sat in the armchair by the bed.

She opened her suitcase, withdrew her writing materials, and sat for a moment with her notebook and pen on her lap. Gently she ran her fingers across the book's cloth cover, tracing the elaborate flower and leaf designs with her finger. Usually the pattern would calm her but this time she turned away in pain. The green of the leaves reminded her too much of the grass on the burning hills. She opened the book quickly and, once the cover was safely hidden by the pages, turned her eyes back to it.

Most of the thick white pages were covered in her script. The slightly slanted letters were etched in rich ink and capped with perhaps too many curly serifs. The lines were perfectly straight even though there were no guiding lines on the paper itself.

Joyce hated lined paper, so each of her notebooks was filled with only pure white cotton fiber sheets, virgin. Her hand and eye kept her words straight as they flowed.

She thumbed the pages of the completed book. She had finished the final poem of the series just last night. After struggling with its rhythm for days back in the States, she had been inspired by the lazy French hills and the verse had nearly written itself. Late last night she had transcribed the finished version into the notebook.

Her notebooks contained final drafts only. Ruminations, experiments, and wrong turns were always written on loose-leaf paper. Only finely tuned, perfectly polished products went into the notebooks. At least, that had always been the case.

Quickly, she flipped to the book's last page and began writing. Her hand shook a bit as she moved the pen, and she was surprised how different the letters looked.

"Special," she wrote.

The phone rang again in her mind but she still refused to answer.

Brian was expecting her in New York tomorrow morning. He expected to see her notebook on his desk. She and Brian had played the scene before. He would read a page or two, smile widely, and open a bottle of champagne. They would enjoy a glass, then go to lunch.

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Her notebook would be transcribed onto computer. The words of the poems would be typeset by the software and printed onto wonderfully rich paper. The pages would be bound into ten thousand books, each wrapped in a floral cloth cover, much like the one on her notebook.

The books would be sent to bookstores, independently owned, by and large, and placed on the stands. And people would buy them, not a lot of people, by any means, just people who liked poetry, people who liked her. And they would not be disappointed.

In Joyce's case, acclaim had come two works too early. Her short book of sonnets three years ago earned her a Pulitzer. Critics adored it. But she had grown since then. Her next book, though not as highly regarded as the first, attested to her growth. It was more mature, less sentimental, and more structurally complex.

This latest work, however, was her best. She knew it last night as she reread the poems in bed. This was not simply poetry. This was emotion, love, and life. This was imaginative, lyrical structure and hauntingly beautiful imagery. These poems were her heart's work. If she were to live a thousand years, her verse would get no better.

Brian expected the notebook tomorrow.

He would not get it.

"Special," she wrote again.

Her handwriting was getting worse. Once again tears welled up in her eyes but she would not let them come. She would not cry.

She turned the television back on and, sure enough, the disaster was still there. Townspeople relived the explosion for the cameras. They described the flaming debris that fell from the sky. One field worker who spoke only fractured English said it was like "raining hell." Joyce chuckled to keep from crying.

On CNN an aviation expert in Washington explained his theory of the accident with a plastic model plane. He tore the left wing off and rolled the plane's body in his hands to show the result. Then he ripped the hull in two and crushed it.

Joyce turned away from the screen and her eyes fell to the bureau by the bed. Her travel itinerary lay atop the nightstand where she'd left it. Her boarding pass sat out in the open, a yellow flag amidst the pale linen cloth. She stared at it and, when she could stand it no longer, turned back to the screen.

An expert on terrorism finished his analysis and the anchorwoman came on with an update.

All one hundred and three people aboard Flight 822 were killed

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instantly in the explosion. Forty people were killed on the ground when the debris hit a French farming village. A Libyan-backed terrorist organization had claimed responsibility.

Joyce bit her lip and turned off the television. She went back to her notebook and took the pen in her shaking hand.

"Special," she wrote again.

"I am special."

The phone rang again. She knew it was only in her mind but this time she let herself remember and she answered it.

"Joyce Bené?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"Who is this?"

"I don't have much time. Are you alone?"

"Yes, I am."

"Do not leave the country tomorrow."

"What?"

"You must not leave."

"I have to be in New York."

"Trust me. You must not leave."

"Who is this?"

"I can't say."

"But . . ."

"Please, Ms. Bené. I don't have time. I beg you. Cancel your flight."

"But why?"

The pause was painful, and then the words, like needles. "Because I love your poetry."

The phone went dead and Joyce listened to the dial tone for a few minutes before putting the receiver back in its cradle.

She had tried to sleep after that but her mind refused to let her. When the alarm went off this morning, she had showered, dressed, and called for a cab to the airport. She carried her suitcase to the elevator and rode down to the lobby, stepped out of the hotel and onto the busy Parisian street.

She gazed at the mass of humanity around her, the strangers hurrying every which way like so many grains of sand on a windswept beach. She stared and she trembled. And when the doorman asked if she wanted her cab, she looked at him as if he were insane. She clutched her suitcase handle so tightly her knuckles blanched. The insanity crashed over her like a wave. She ran

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back into the hotel, back to the horrible safety of her room, and waited.

Flight 822 left the Paris airport without her at 11:15 A.M. It exploded over the countryside at 11:33, killing one hundred forty-three people in the air and on the ground.

Grains of sand on a windswept beach.

Joyce stared at the notebook in her shaking hands.

"Special," she wrote.

"Why I am special . . ."

She took a deep, trembling breath and remembered the field worker on television.

"Raining hell."

She thought of the cow in the field, crushed by the death falling from the sky.

"Special."

She thought of the thousands of people on the street outside.

"Why I am special . . ."

And she thought of the phone call. He had known who she was. He had known where she was staying. He had known her travel plans. He had known everything. He was no ordinary terrorist. That was for certain. He was a tiny piece of a larger conspiracy with a weakness for verse. He had saved her, only her, and only because he loved her poetry.

"Why I am special . . ." she wrote.

She bit her lip in one last attempt to hold back the tears.

"I'm not."

She closed the book, rose, and walked quickly to the bathroom. She put a match to the thick white pages and held tightly as the flames engulfed them. The skin of her fingers blistered as the flames bit them but she endured the pain. It was nothing, after all, compared to what she should have felt. She dropped the book into the sink and watched as the leaves and flowers on the cover burned. Then, at last, she cried.

It would be several minutes before the tears would end. Afterward, she would call Brian and let him know she was alive. Then she would call the police and tell them about the phone call.

And there would be raining hell to pay. ●

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Art by Ron Chironna

THE WHITE FAWN

by Steven Saylor

The old senator was a distant cousin of my friend Lucius Claudius, and the two had once been close. That was the only reason I agreed to see the man, as a favor to Lucius. When Lucius let it slip, on the way to the senator's house, that the affair had something to do with Sertorius, I clucked my tongue and almost turned back. I had a feeling even then that it would lead to no good. Call it a premonition, if you will; if you believe that such things as premonitions exist.

Senator Gaius Claudius's house was on the Aventine Hill, not the most fashionable district in Rome. Still, there are plenty of old patrician households tucked amid the cramped little shops and ugly new tenements that sprawl over the hill. The facade of the senator's house was humble, but that meant nothing; the houses of the Roman nobility are often unassuming, at least on the outside.

The doddering doorkeeper recognized Lucius (could there be two

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men in Rome with his beaming round face, untidy red hair, and dancing green eyes?) and escorted us at once to the atrium, where a fountain gurgled and splashed but did little to relieve the heat of a cloudless midsummer day. While we waited for our host to appear, Lucius and I strolled from corner to corner of the little square garden. On such a warm day, the various rooms facing the atrium all had their shutters thrown open.

"I take it that your cousin has fallen on hard times," I said to Lucius.

"'The White Fawn' is based very closely on true events," author Steven Saylor says, citing Plutarch as one of his sources. Readers interested in the Roman period as a setting for historical mysteries may want to pick up a copy of *Classical Whodunits*, edited by Mike Ashley. In addition to the following Saylor story, the book includes fiction by Lindsey Davis and John Maddox Roberts.

He pursed his lips. "Why do you assume that, Gordianus? I don't recall mentioning it."

"Observe the state of his house."

"It's a fine house. Gaius had it built when he was a young man and has lived here ever since."

"It seems rather sparsely decorated."

"You saw the busts of his noble ancestors lined up in their niches in the foyer," said Lucius, his nose tilting up. "What more ornamentation does the house of a patrician require?" Despite his genial temperament, Lucius sometimes could not help being a bit of a snob.

"But I think your cousin is a great lover of art, or used to be."

"Now why do you say that?"

"Observe the mosaic floor beneath our feet, with its intricate acanthus-leaf pattern. The workmanship is very fine. And note the wall paintings in some of the rooms around us. The various scenes are from the *Iliad*, I believe. Even from here I can see that they're works of very high quality."

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Cousin Gaius does have good taste, I'll grant you that. But why do you assume he's fallen on hard times?"

"Because of the things that I don't see."

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"Now, Gordianus, really! How can you walk into a house you've never entered before and declare that things are missing? I can see into the surrounding rooms as well as you, and they all look adequately furnished."

"Precisely; the furnishings are adequate. I should expect something more than that from the man who built this house and commissioned those wall paintings and mosaics. Where is the finely wrought furniture? Everything I see looks like the common stuff that anyone can buy ready-made down in the Street of the Woodworkers. Where are the paintings, the portable ones in frames, the portraits and bucolic scenes that are so fashionable nowadays?"

"What makes you think that cousin Gaius ever collected such works?"

"Because I can see the discolored rectangles on the wall where they used to hang! And surely a rather substantial statue once filled that empty spot atop the pedestal in the middle of the fountain. Let me guess: Diana with her bow, or perhaps a discus-thrower?"

"A rather good drunken Hercules, actually."

"Such valuables don't vanish from a patrician household without good reason. This house is like a bare cupboard, or a fine Roman matron without her jewelry. Where are the urns, the vases, the precious little things one expects to see in the house of a wealthy old senator? Auctioned off to pay the bill collector, I presume. When did your cousin sell them?"

"Over the last few years," admitted Lucius with a sigh, "bit by bit. I suppose the mosaics and wall paintings would be gone by now as well, except that they're part of the house and can't be disposed of piecemeal. The Civil War was very hard on cousin Gaius."

"He backed the wrong side?"

"Quite the opposite! Gaius was a staunch supporter of Sulla. But his only son, who was my age, had married into a family that sided with Marius, and was contaminated by his wife's connections; he was beheaded when Sulla became dictator. He did leave an heir, however—Gaius's grandson, a boy named Mamercus, who is now not quite twenty. Gaius took custody of his grandson, but also had to assume his dead son's debts, which were crushing. Poor cousin Gaius! The Civil War tore his family apart, took his only son, and left him virtually bankrupt."

I looked around. "The house itself looks valuable enough."

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"I'm sure it is, but it's all that Gaius has left. The wealth has all fled. And so has young Mamercus, I fear."

"The grandson?"

"Gone to Spain! It's broken his grandfather's heart."

"Spain? Ah, so that's why you mentioned Sertorius on the walk here. . . ."

The Civil War had been over for six years. Marius had lost. Sulla had won, and had made himself dictator. He disposed of his enemies, reordered the state, and then retired, leaving his chosen successors in firm control of the senate and the magistracies. The Marians—those who had survived the proscriptions and still had their heads—were lying low. But in Spain, the last embers of resistance still smoldered in the person of Quintus Sertorius. The renegade general not only refused to surrender, but had declared himself to be the head of the legitimate Roman state. Disgruntled Marian military men and desperate anti-Sullan senators had fled from Rome to join Sertorius's government-in-exile. In addition to his own legions, Sertorius had succeeded in rallying the native population to his side. Altogether, Sertorius and his forces in Spain constituted a considerable power that the Roman senate could not ignore and had not yet been able to stamp out.

"Are you saying that young Mamercus has run off to join Sertorius?"

"So it appears," said Lucius, shaking his head. He leaned over to sniff a rose. "This smells very sweet!"

"So young Mamercus rejected his grandfather's Sullan politics and remained loyal to his mother's side of the family?"

"So it appears. Gaius is quite distraught. The folly of youth! There's no future for anyone who sides with Sertorius."

"But what future would the young man have if he'd stayed here in Rome with his grandfather? You say that Gaius is bankrupt."

"It's a question of loyalty, Gordianus, and family dignity." Lucius spoke carefully. I could see he was doing his patrician best not to sound condescending.

I shrugged. "Perhaps the boy feels he's being loyal to his dead father by joining the last resistance to Sulla's faction. But I take your point, Lucius; it's a family tragedy of a sort all too common these days. But what can your cousin want of me?"

"I should think that was obvious. He wants someone to—ah, but here is Gaius himself. . . ."

"Cousin Lucius! Embrace me!" A frail-looking old man in a sena-

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torial toga stepped into the atrium with wide-open arms. "Let me feel another of my own flesh and blood pressed against me!"

The two men could hardly have been more different. Gaius was older, of course, but also tall and narrow, where Lucius was short and round. And where Lucius was florid and flushed, there was a grayness about the old senator, not only in his hair and wrinkled hands, but also in his expression and manner, a kind of drawn, sere, stoic austerity. Like his house, the man seemed to have been stripped bare of all vain adornments and winnowed to his essence.

After a moment the two drew apart. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint me, Lucius. Is this the fellow?"

"Yes, this is Gordianus, called the Finder."

"Let us hope he lives up to his name." Gaius Claudius regarded me not with the patronizing gaze I was used to receiving from patricians, but steadily and deeply, as if to judge whether I should be a cause of hope to him or not. "He looks reliable enough," he finally pronounced. "Ah, but what judge of character am I, who let my only son marry into a Marian family, and then could not foresee my grandson's intentions to follow the same course to disaster?"

"Yes, I was just informing Gordianus of your situation," said Lucius.

"And is he willing?"

"Actually, we were just coming to that . . ."

There must indeed have been a last thin veil of vanity over the old senator's demeanor, for now I saw it fall away. He looked at me imploringly. "The boy is all I have left! I must at least know for certain what's become of him, and why he's done this mad thing, and if he can't be persuaded to see reason! Will you do this for me, Gordianus?"

"Do what, Gaius Claudius?" I said, though I was beginning to see all too clearly.

"Find him! Go to Spain for me. Take my message. Bring him back to me!"

I cleared my throat. "Let me understand you, Gaius Claudius. You wish for me to venture into Sertorius's territory? You must realize that the whole of the Spanish peninsula is wracked with warfare. The danger—"

"You will demand a large fee, I suppose. . . ." Gaius averted his eyes and wrung his hands.

"The fee is not an issue," said Lucius.

"I'm afraid that it most certainly is," I said, not following his

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meaning. Then I saw the look that passed between Lucius and his cousin, and understood. Gaius Claudius had no money; it was Lucius who would be paying my fee, and Lucius, as I well knew, could afford to be generous. The commission would be coming just as much from my dear friend as from his cousin, then. That made me feel all the more obliged to accept it.

Thus I came to find myself, some days later, on the eastern coast of Spain, near the village of Sucro, which is situated not far from the mouth of the river of the same name.

I was not alone. After a great deal of internal debate and hesitation, I had decided to bring Eco with me. On the one hand, I was likely to encounter danger, quite possibly a great deal of danger; who knows what may happen in a foreign land torn by warfare? On the other hand, a nimble, quick-witted fourteen-year-old boy who had survived the harsh streets of Rome from his earliest years (despite the handicap of his muteness) is not a bad companion to have around in unpredictable surroundings. And for his own benefit, I thought it a good thing that Eco should learn the lessons of travel while he was still young, especially since Lucius Claudius was paying the expenses.

First had come the sea voyage, on a trading ship out of Puteoli bound for Mauretania. For a reasonable sum, the captain agreed to put us ashore at New Carthage, in Spain. That had gone well enough. Pirates had pursued us only once, and our experienced captain had managed to outrun them easily; and Eco had suffered from seasickness only for the first day or two. Once ashore, we sought for news of Sertorius's whereabouts, and made our way north until we caught up with him at Sucro, where we arrived only two days after a tremendous battle on the banks of the river.

According to the locals, Sertorius had suffered heavy casualties, perhaps as many as ten thousand men; but so had the opposing Roman general, the Sullan boy-wonder Pompey (not quite such a boy any longer at thirty), who had been wounded himself, though not gravely. The two sides appeared to be regrouping their forces, and a fresh rumor had it that Pompey's colleague Metellus was soon to arrive with reinforcements from the north. The townspeople of Sucro were bracing themselves for another great battle.

Getting into Sertorius's camp proved to be easier than I anticipated. The traditional rigid discipline of a Roman army camp was missing; perhaps, given Sertorius's mix of Spanish tribesmen and ragtag Romans, such discipline was impossible. In its place there

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seemed to be a great sense of camaraderie, and of welcome to the local camp followers who came to offer food and wares (and in not a few cases, themselves) for sale to the soldiers. The air of the camp was open and almost festive, despite the great slaughter of two days before. Morale, clearly, was very high.

I inquired after the whereabouts of Mamercus Claudius, using the description his grandfather had given me—a young patrician of nineteen, tall, slender, with a pleasant face and a shock of jet-black hair, a newcomer to the ranks. Among the grizzled Roman veterans and their Spanish allies, such a fellow was likely to stand out, I thought, and sure enough, it took only a little asking (and a pittance of bribes) before Eco and I were pointed to his tent.

The location surprised me, for it was very near the heart of the camp, and thus not far, I presumed, from Sertorius's own quarters. Despite his youth and inexperience, Mamercus Claudius was probably quite a catch for Sertorius, evidence to his fellow Romans that the renegade general could still attract a youth from one of Rome's best families, that his cause looked toward the future, not just the past.

This presumption turned out to be more astute than I realized. When I asked the centurion outside the tent to inform Mamercus that he had a visitor, I was told that Mamercus was elsewhere. When I asked where he might be, the centurion suggested that I try the commander's tent.

So Eco and I made our way to the tent of Quintus Sertorius himself, which was quite conspicuous thanks to the phalanx of guards around it. There was also a great crowd of petitioners of the usual sort lined up to seek audience—locals who hoped to sell provisions to the army, or had suffered property damage and wanted restitution, or had other pressing business with the commander and his staff.

Eco tapped the edge of one hand against the flattened palm of the other, to suggest that we had run into a solid wall: *We shall never get inside that tent,* he seemed to say.

"Ah, but we don't need to get inside," I said to him. "We want someone who's already in there to come out, and that's a different matter."

I walked to the head of the long line. Some in the queue glared at us, but I ignored them. I came to the man who was next to be admitted and cleared my throat to get his attention. He turned and gave me a nasty look and said something in his native tongue.

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When he saw that I didn't understand, he repeated himself in passable Latin. "What do you think you're doing? I'm next. Get away!"

"You're here to see Quintus Sertorius?" I said.

"Like everyone else. Wait your turn."

"Ah, but I don't want to see the general himself. I only want someone to give a message to a young fellow who's probably in there with him. Could you do me the favor?" I patted my hand against the coin purse inside my tunic, which clinked suggestively. "Ask after a young Roman named Mamercus Claudius. Tell him that someone has come a very long way to talk to him."

"I suppose . . ." The man seemed dubious, but then his face abruptly brightened, as if reflecting the glitter of sunlight on the coins I dropped into his hand.

Just then a guard approached, searched the fellow for weapons, and told him to step into the tent.

We did not have long to wait. Soon a lanky young man stepped out of the tent. His armored leather fittings seemed to have been tailored for a shorter, stockier man; I had noticed that many of Sertorius's junior officers were outfitted in similarly haphazard fashion. The young man pulled uncomfortably at the armholes of his leather shirt and peered into the crowd, looking rather put out. I caught his eye and beckoned for him to meet me at one side of the tent.

"Mamercus Claudius?" I said. "I come with a message from—"

"What do you think you're doing, you idiot, summoning me from the commander's tent like that?" He was angry but kept his voice low.

"I suppose I could have lined up with the rest for an audience with the general—"

"What!" He looked at me dubiously. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gordianus, called the Finder. This is my son, Eco. We've come all the way from Rome. Your grandfather sent me."

Mamercus seemed taken aback at first, then smiled ruefully. "I see. Poor grandfather!"

"Poor indeed," I said, "and poorer still for lack of your company."

"Is he well?"

"In body, yes. But his spirit is eaten away by fear for you. I've brought a message from him."

I produced the little folded tablet that I had faithfully brought all the way from Rome. The two thick plates of wood were bound together with a ribbon and sealed with a daub of red wax, upon

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which Gaius Claudius had pressed his signet ring. Mamercus broke the seal, pulled the tablets apart, and gazed at the wax surfaces inside, upon which his grandfather had scratched his plea by his own hand, no longer having even a secretary to write his letters for him.

Had Mamercus's reaction been callous and uncaring, I would not have been surprised. Many an impatient, bitter, dispossessed young man in his situation might have scorned a doting grandparent's concern, especially if that grandparent had always supported the very establishment against which he was rebelling. But Mamercus's reaction was quite different. I watched the swift movement of his eyes as they perused the words and saw them glisten with tears. He clamped his jaw tightly to stop his lips from quivering. His evident distress made him look almost as boyish as Eco.

Gaius Claudius had not kept the contents of his letter secret from me. On the contrary, he had insisted that I read it:

> My dearest grandson, blood of my blood, what has induced you to take this foolish course? Do you think to please the shade of your father by joining a hopeless struggle against those who destroyed him? If this were the only course open to you—if your own name and future had been ruined along with your father's and mother's—then honor might demand such a desperate course. But in Rome you still have my protection, despite your father's downfall, and you can still make a career for yourself. We are woefully impoverished, to be sure, but together we will find a way out of our misfortune! Surely the best revenge for your father would be for you to restore our family's fortunes and to make a place for yourself in the state, so that when you are my age you can look back upon a long career and a world you have had a hand in shaping to your liking. Do not throw your life away! Please, I beg you, calm your passions and let reason guide you. Come back to me! The man who bears this message has funds sufficient for your passage home. Mamercus, son of my son, I pray to the gods that I shall see you soon!

After a while Mamercus pressed the tablets together and retied the ribbon. He averted his eyes in a way that reminded me of his grandfather. "Thank you for bringing the letter. Is that all?"

"*Is* it all?" I said. "I know what's in the letter. Will you honor his request?"

"No. Leave me now."

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"Are you sure, Mamercus? Will you think on it? Shall I come back later?"

"No!"

My commission from Gaius Claudius was specific: I was to locate Mamercus, to deliver the message, and to help Mamercus, if he chose, to escape unscathed from Sertorius's service. It was not incumbent on me to persuade him to leave. But I had come a long way, and now I had seen both the old senator's distress and his grandson's response to it. If Mamercus had reacted with derision, if he had betrayed no love for his grandfather, that would have been the end of it. But his reaction had been quite the opposite. Even now, from the way he gently held the tablets, almost caressing them, and reached up to wipe his eyes, I could see that he was feeling a great flood of affection for the old man, and consequently, perhaps, considerable confusion over the choice he had made.

I thought it wise to change the subject for a moment. "You seem to have done well for yourself, here in Sertorius's army," I said.

"Better than I expected, in so short a time," admitted Mamercus. He tucked the tablets under his arm and smiled crookedly. "The commander was very glad to take me in. He gave me a position on his staff at once, despite my lack of experience. 'Look,' he said to everyone, 'a young Claudius, come all the way from Rome to join us! But don't worry, son, we'll be back in Rome before you know it, and it's the blasted Sullans who'll be searching for their heads!' "

"And do you believe that? Is that why you choose to stay?"

Mamercus bristled. "The question is, what's keeping *you* here, Gordianus? I've given you my answer. Now, go!"

At that moment, the crowd before the commander's tent broke into a cheer. I heard the name Sertorius shouted aloud in acclamation, and saw that the great man himself had emerged from the tent. He was a tall, robust-looking man with a strong jaw and a smile that radiated confidence. Some mortals possess a charismatic allure that is almost divine, that anyone can see at a glance, and Quintus Sertorius was such a mortal. This was a man whom other men would trust implicitly and follow without question, to glory or death. The cheers that greeted his appearance, from both his own soldiers and from the local petitioners, were absolutely genuine and spontaneous.

Then the cries died away to a whispered hush. Eco and I looked at one another, puzzled. The cheering was understandable, but

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what was this? It was the hush of religious awe such as one hears in Rome at certain ancient rites performed in the temples in the Forum, a barely audible welter of whispers and murmurs and muttered prayers.

Then I saw the remarkable creature that had followed Sertorius out of the tent.

It was a young fawn. Her soft pelt was utterly white, without a single spot of color. She gamboled after Sertorius like a loyal hound, and when he paused she nuzzled against his thigh and lifted her snout for him to stroke. I had never seen anything like it.

The hush grew louder, and amid the strange dialects I heard snatches of Latin:

"The white fawn! The white fawn!"

"They both look happy—that must mean good news!"

"Diana! Bless us, goddess! Bless Quintus Sertorius!"

Sertorius smiled and laughed and bent down to take the fawn's head in his hands. He kissed her right on the snout.

This evoked an even louder murmur from the crowd—and from one onlooker, a loud, barking laugh. My dear mute son has a very strange laugh, alas, rather like the braying of a mule. The fawn's ears shot straight up and she cowered behind Sertorius, tripping awkwardly over her spindly legs. Heads turned toward us, casting suspicious looks. Eco clamped his hands over his mouth. Sertorius peered in our direction, frowning. He saw Mamercus, then appraised me with a curious eye.

"Mamercus Claudius!" he called. "I wondered where you'd got to. Come!"

Sertorius pressed on through the worshipful crowd, with the white fawn and a cordon of guards following behind. Included in the retinue, I was surprised to see, was a girl who could hardly have been older than Eco. She was a beautiful child, with dark eyes and cheeks like white rose petals. Dressed all in white, with her black hair bound up in a scarf, she looked and carried herself like a priestess, keeping her eyes straight ahead and striding between the soldiers with a grace and self-assurance beyond her years.

"A white fawn!" I said. "And that girl! Who is she, Mamercus?"

But Mamercus only glowered at me and went to join Sertorius. I ran after him and clutched his arm.

"Mamercus, I shall try to find lodgings in Sucro tonight. If you should change your mind—"

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He yanked his arm from my grasp and strode off without looking back.

Lodgings were not hard to find in Sucro. There was only one tavern with accommodations, and the place was deserted. The battle between Pompey and Sertorius had driven travelers far away, and the likelihood of another battle was keeping them away.

The tavern keeper was a strong-looking Celt with a shaggy black beard, named Lacro. He seemed to be in high spirits despite the hardships of war, and was glad to have two paying guests to share wine and conversation in the common room that night. Lacro's family had lived on the banks of the Sucro for generations. He boasted proudly of the bounty of the river and the beauty of the coast. His favorite recreation was to go trapping and hunting in the marshes near the river's mouth, where birds flocked in great numbers and crustacean delicacies could be plucked from the mud. Lacro had apparently been spending a lot of time in the marshes lately, if only to stay clear of the fighting.

But he did not complain about the war, except to excoriate Pompey and Metellus. Lacro was very much a partisan of Sertorius, and praised him for unifying the various Celtic and Iberian tribes of Spain. He had no quarrel with Romans, he said, so long as they were like Sertorius; if it took a Roman to give his people leadership, then so be it. When I told him that Eco and I had come that very day from the great commander's camp, and indeed had caught a glimpse of Sertorius himself, Lacro was quite impressed.

"And did you see the white fawn?" he asked.

"Yes, we did. A strange creature to keep as a pet."

"The white fawn is not a pet!" Lacro was appalled at the idea. "The white fawn was sent to Sertorius as a gift, by Diana. The goddess speaks to him through the fawn. The fawn tells Sertorius the future."

"Really?"

"How else do you think he's gone undefeated for so long, no matter how many armies Rome sends against him? Did you think that Sertorius was merely lucky? No, he has divine protection! The white fawn is a holy creature."

"I see," I said, but apparently without sufficient conviction.

"Bah! You Romans, you've conquered the world but you've lost sight of the gods. You saw the white fawn with your own eyes, and thought it was a mere pet! But not Sertorius; that's what makes him different."

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"How did Sertorius acquire this amazing creature?"

"They say some hunters came upon the fawn in a wood. She walked right up to them and told them to take her to the great leader. The hunters brought her to Sertorius. When he bent down to nuzzle the fawn's face, she spoke to him in his own tongue, and he recognized the voice of Diana. The two have never parted since. The fawn follows Sertorius everywhere, or, strictly speaking, he follows the fawn, since it's she who tells him where his enemies are and what routes to take. Ah, so you saw her with your own eyes. I envy you! I've never seen her, only heard of her."

"This white fawn is quite famous, then?"

"Everyone knows of her. I keep a tavern, don't I? I know what people talk about, and every man from the Pyrenees to the Pillars of Hercules loves the white fawn!"

Since there was only one tavern in Sucro, Mamercus Claudius had no trouble finding us the next morning. He stepped into the common room just as Eco and I were finishing our breakfast of bread and dates. So, I thought, the young man has decided to return to his grandfather after all. I smiled at him. He did not smile back.

I realized that he was still in his military garb, and that he was not alone. A small band of soldiers entered the room behind him, all wearing the same grim look.

His visit was official, then. My breakfast turned heavy in my stomach. My mouth went dry. I remembered the evil premonition I had felt about this mission from the very first, even before I met Gaius Claudius. . . .

Mamercus marched up to us. His manner was soldierly and impersonal. "Gordianus! Quintus Sertorius has sent me to fetch you."

Then it *was* the worst, I thought. Mamercus had betrayed me to Sertorius, and now Sertorius was having me arrested for trying to engineer the defection of an officer. I had known the mission would be dangerous; I should have been more cautious. Mamercus had made it clear the previous day that he had no intention of returning to Rome with me; why had I lingered in Sucro? I had tarried too long, a victim of my own sentimental sympathy for the old senator. And I had made Eco a victim, as well. He was only a boy—surely Sertorius would not lop his head off along with mine. But what would become of him after I was gone? Sertorius would probably conscript him as a foot soldier, I thought. Was that to be

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Eco's fate, to end his days on a battlefield, fighting for a lost cause in a foreign land? If only I had left him behind in Rome!

I stood as bravely as I could and gestured for Eco to do the same. Mamercus and his men escorted us out of the tavern and marched us up the river road, back to the camp. The men's faces looked even grimmer under the bright morning sun. Not one of them said a word.

The same grimness presided in the camp. Every face we saw was glum and silent. Where were the high spirits of the day before?

We came to Sertorius's tent. Mamercus pulled back the flap and announced my name. He gestured for Eco and me to enter. He himself remained outside, as did the other soldiers.

The commander was alone; more alone, in fact, than I realized at first. He rose from his chair eagerly, as if he had been waiting impatiently, and strode toward us. This was not the reception I had expected.

"Gordianus the Finder!" he said, grasping my hand. "What good fortune that you should happen to be here on such a day! Do you know why I've summoned you?"

"I'm beginning to think that I don't." The look on Sertorius's face was grim but not hostile. My head started to feel noticeably more secure on my shoulders.

"Then you haven't heard the news yet?"

"What news?"

"Excellent! That means that word hasn't yet spread to the town. One tries to keep down the gossip and rumors when something like this happens, but it's like putting out fires in a hayfield—"

I looked about the crowded tent, at the general's sleeping cot, the portable cabinets with maps and scrolls stacked on top, the little lamps on tripods. Something was missing . . .

"Where is the white fawn?" I said.

The color drained from his face. "Then you *have* heard the news?"

"No. But if there is some crisis at hand, shouldn't your divine counselor be with you?"

Sertorius swallowed hard. "Someone has stolen her in the night. Someone has kidnapped the white fawn!"

"I see. But why have you sent for me, Quintus Sertorius?"

"Don't be coy, Finder. I know your reputation."

"You've heard of me?"

Sertorius managed a wry smile. "I do have some idea of what

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goes on in Rome, even if I haven't been there in years. I have my spies and informants there—just as Pompey and the senate no doubt have their spies in my camp. I try to keep abreast of who's taking whom to court, who's up and who's down. You might be surprised how often your name comes up. Yes, I know who you are."

"And do you know what brought me here?" I wanted to be absolutely certain that we understood each other.

"Yes, yes. I asked Mamercus about you yesterday. He showed me the letter. What a silly hen his grandfather is! The Sullans can have the old fellow—I have the grandson, and he's turned out to be worth any three of Pompey's officers, I'll wager! Bright, curious, clever, and wholly committed to the cause. If the powers-that-be in Rome had any sense, they'd have restored his family's estates and tried to win Mamercus over to their side once his father was out of the way. But the Sullans always were a greedy lot of short-sighted bastards. They've driven all the best young men to Spain; all the better for me!" For just a moment he flashed the dazzling smile which had no doubt won the hearts of those bright young men. Then the smile faded. "But back to the business at hand. They call you the Finder, don't they? Well, I am a man who has lost something, and I must find it again!"

At night, Sertorius explained, the fawn was kept in a little tent of its own, near the general's quarters. For religious reasons, the opening of the fawn's tent was situated to face the rising moon; it had so happened, in this particular camp, that the front of the fawn's tent faced away from most of the others, and so was not visible to Sertorius's own night watch. The tent had its own guards, however, a pair of Celts who had vied for the religious honor of protecting Diana's emissary. These two had apparently been given a powerful drug and had slept the night through. Sertorius was convinced of their tearful remorse at having failed the white fawn, but otherwise had not been able to get any useful information from them.

I asked to see the tent. Sertorius led me there himself. Before we entered, he glanced at Eco.

"The boy has seen death before?" he said.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"It's not a gory sight—believe me, I've seen gore! Still, it's not pretty to look at."

He gave no further explanation, but led us into the tent. A little

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pen had been erected inside, with straw scattered on the ground along with pails of water and fresh grass. There was also, outside the pen, a little sleeping cot, upon which lay the girl we had seen in the general's entourage the previous day. She was dressed in the same white gown, but the white scarf was no longer around her head, so that her hair lay in a shimmering black pool around her white face. Her legs were straight and her hands were folded on her chest. She might almost have been sleeping, except for the unnatural, waxy paleness of her flesh and the circle of bruised, chafed skin around her throat.

"Is this how you found her?" I asked.

"No," said Sertorius. "She was there in front of the pen, lying crumpled on the ground."

"Who was she?"

"Just a girl from one of the Celtic tribes. Their priests said that only a virgin should be allowed to feed and groom the white fawn. This girl volunteered. It brought great honor to her family. Her name was Liria."

"Where is her white scarf, the one she wore around her hair?"

"You *are* observant, Finder. The scarf is missing."

"Do you think . . . ?" I reached toward the marks on her throat. "A scarf would be one way of strangling someone."

Sertorius nodded gravely. "She must have tried to stop them. The guards were drugged, which means that Liria should have been drugged as well; she always ate the same food. But last night she may have fasted. She did that sometimes; she claimed that the white fawn would order her to fast, to keep herself pure. When they came to take the fawn, she must have waked, and they strangled her to keep her from crying out."

"But why didn't they simply kill the fawn, instead of kidnapping it?"

Sertorius sighed. "This land is crawling with superstition, Gordianus. Omens and portents are in every breath, and a man can't take a piss without some god or other looking over his shoulder. I suspect that whoever did this had no intention of murdering anyone. What they wanted, what they intended, was that the fawn should simply disappear, don't you see? As if it had fled on its own. As if Diana had abruptly deserted me to my fate. What would my Spanish soldiers make of that? Can you understand what a disaster that would be for me, Gordianus?"

He stared at the dead girl, then tore his eyes away and paced back and forth in the small space before the pen. "The kidnappers

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added murder to their crime; that was sacrilege enough, though Liria wasn't really a priestess, just a girl from a humble family who happened still to be a virgin. But they would never have killed the fawn. That would have defeated their purpose. To kill the emissary of Diana would be an unforgivable atrocity. That would only strengthen the resolve of the tribes to fend off such an impious enemy. That's why I'm certain the fawn is still alive and unharmed.

"I've tried to keep this quiet, Gordianus, but I think the rumor has already begun to spread among the men that the fawn is missing. The Roman soldiers will suspect the truth, I imagine, that she was kidnapped for political reasons. But the natives—the natives will think that the gods have turned against me."

"Is their faith in the white fawn really so great?"

"Oh yes! That's why I've used it, as a powerful tool to bind them to me. Powerful, but dangerous; superstition can be turned against the man who uses it, you see. I should have guarded her better!"

"Do you believe in the white fawn yourself, Sertorius? Does she speak to you?"

He looked at me shrewdly. "I'm surprised that you even ask such a question, Gordianus. I'm a Roman general, not a credulous Spaniard. The white fawn is nothing more than a device of statecraft. Must I explain? One day my spies inform me of Pompey's movements; the next day I announce that the white fawn whispered in my ear that Pompey will be seen in a certain place at a certain time, and sure enough, he is. Whenever I learn a secret or see into the future, the knowledge comes to me from the white fawn—officially. Whenever I have to give an order that the natives find hard to stomach—such as burning one of their own villages, or putting a popular man to death—I tell them it must be done because the white fawn says so. It makes things much, much easier. And whenever things look uncertain, and the natives are on the verge of losing heart, I tell them that the white fawn has promised me a victory. They find their courage, then; they rally, and they make the victory happen.

"Do you think me blasphemous for resorting to such a device? The best generals have always done such things to shore up their men's morale. Look at Sulla! Before a battle, he always made sure his troops would catch him mumbling to a little image he stole from the oracle at Delphi; the deity invariably promised him victory. And Marius, too—he kept a Syrian wisewoman in his

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entourage, who could always be counted on to foresee disaster for his enemies. Too bad she failed him in the end.

"Even Alexander pulled such tricks. Do you know the story? Once when things looked bleak before a battle, his priests called for a blood sacrifice. While the sheep was being prepared at the altar, Alexander painted the letters N I backwards on the palms of one hand, and K E on the other. The priest cut open the sheep, pulled out the steaming liver, and placed it in Alexander's hands. Alexander turned it over to show his men, and sure enough, there it was, written on the liver in letters no one could mistake—the word for victory!"

"And your device was the white fawn?"

Sertorius stopped his pacing and looked me in the eye. "Here in Spain, the local tribes, especially the Celts, have a special belief in the mystical power of white animals. A good general makes note of such beliefs. When the hunters brought Dianara to me that day—"

"Dianara?"

Did he look slightly embarrassed? "I call the white fawn Dianara, after the goddess. Why not? When they brought her to me, I saw at once what could be done with her. I made her my divine counselor! And the strategy has paid off handsomely. But now—"

Sertorius began to pace again. "My scouts tell me that Metellus has joined Pompey on the other side of the Sucro. If my Spaniards find out that the fawn is missing and I'm forced into another battle—the result could be an utter disaster. What man will fight for a general whom the gods have deserted? My only chance now is to withdraw west into the highlands as quickly as I can. But in the meantime, the fawn must be found!" He gave me a look that was at once desperate and demanding.

"I'm a Finder, Quintus Sertorius, not a hunter."

"This is a kidnapping, Gordianus, not a chase. I'll pay you well. Bring Dianara back to me and I shall reward you handsomely."

I considered. My commission from Gaius Claudius was completed. I had verified young Mamercus's whereabouts, delivered the letter, and given him every chance to accompany me back to Rome. I was a free agent again, in a foreign land, and a powerful man was seeking my help.

On the other hand, to aid a renegade general in the field would surely, in the view of the Roman senate, constitute an act of treason . . .

I liked Sertorius, because he was honest and brave, and, in the

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long run, the underdog. I liked him even better when he named an actual figure as a reward.

I agreed. If I could not return an errant young man to his grandfather, perhaps I could return a missing fawn to her master.

Sertorius allowed me to question the two guards who had been drugged. I could only agree with his own assessment, that the men were truly remorseful for what had happened and that they had nothing useful to tell. Neither did any of the other watchmen; no one had seen or heard a thing. It was as if the moon herself had reached down to fetch the white fawn home.

By the time Eco and I arrived back in Sucro that afternoon, the tavern was full of locals, all thirsty for wine and hungry for any news they could get of the missing white fawn. The secret was out, and rumors were flying wild. I listened attentively; one never knows when a bit of gossip may be helpful. Some said that the fawn had actually deserted Sertorius long ago (this was patently false, since I had seen the creature myself). Others claimed that the fawn had died, and that Sertorius had buried it and was only pretending that it had disappeared. A few said that the fawn had been stolen, but no one reported the death of the virgin. Perhaps the wildest rumor (and the most ominous) asserted that the fawn had showed up in Pompey's camp, and was now his confidant.

None of this was very helpful. After the local crowd dispersed to their homes for the night, I asked our host what he made of it all.

"Not a one of them knows a blasted thing! All a bunch of windbags." Lacro said this cheerily enough, and why not? He must have turned a nice profit on the sale of wine that day, and quite a few of the crowd had stayed on for dinner. "The only story that rang true to my ears was the one about the fawn being seen in the marshes."

"What's this? I missed that one."

"That's because the fellow who told it wasn't shouting his head off like the fools who had nothing to say. He was here behind the counter, talking to me. An old friend of mine; we sometimes go trapping in the marshes together. He was there early this morning. Says he caught a glimpse of something white off in the distance, in a stand of swamp trees."

"Perhaps he saw a bird."

"Too big for a bird, he said, and it moved like a beast, from here to there along the ground."

"Did he get a closer look?"

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"He tried. But by the time he reached the trees, there was nothing to be seen—nothing except fresh hoof prints in the mud. The prints of a young deer, of that he was certain. And footprints as well."

"Footprints?"

"Two men, he said. One on each side of the fawn."

Eco gripped my arm and shook it. I agreed; this was very interesting. "Did your friend follow these tracks?"

"No, he turned back and went about his business, checking his traps." Lacro raised an eyebrow. "He didn't say as much, but from the look on his face, I think he felt afraid when he saw those tracks. This is a fellow who knows the marshes like his own mother's face; knows what belongs there and what doesn't, and if something's not right. He saw those tracks and felt a bit of awe, standing where Diana's gift had passed. Mark my words, that white fawn is in the marshes."

Eco nudged me and put his hands to his throat, miming strangulation. Lacro looked puzzled.

I translated. "If your friend was afraid to follow those tracks, then his instincts probably *are* good." At least one person had already been murdered by the fawn's abductors.

"I don't quite follow you."

I looked at him steadily. "Yesterday, you spoke well of Sertorius . . ."

"I did."

"And you spoke with reverence about the white fawn . . ."

"Diana's gift."

"Lacro, I want to tell you a secret. Something very important."

"So, what are you waiting for? Who can keep secrets better than an innkeeper?" He hooked his thumb and gestured to the sleeping quarters upstairs, as if alluding to all the trysts which had taken place under his roof that would never be revealed by his telling.

"And do you think this friend of yours could keep a secret, as well?" I said. "And more importantly, do you think he might agree to guide a couple of strangers into the marshes? There's likely to be some danger—but there'll be a fee in it, too. A fee for you both . . ."

Before daybreak the next morning, we set out for the marshes.

Lacro and his friend, who was called Stilensis, led the way. Eco and I followed behind.

We came to the stand of trees where Stilensis had seen the tracks. They were still visible in the mud, picked out sharply by

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the first slanting rays of sunlight. We followed them. In places where the ground was too hard or too soft, the trail seemed to vanish, at least to my eyes, but our experienced guides were able to discern even the faintest traces. Occasionally even they lost the trail, and when that happened they would patiently circle about until they found it again. Sometimes I could see how they did it, by spotting a broken twig or a crumpled leaf; at other times it seemed to me that they were guided by some hidden instinct, or simple luck. Perhaps Lacro would say that Diana showed them the way.

They also seemed to sense, by some unknown faculty, the moment that we came within earshot of our prey. At the same moment, Lacro and Stilensis both turned and gestured for us to be utterly silent.

As for the enemy, there were only two of them, as the tracks had indicated; but the tracks had also indicated, by their size and deepness, that the men making them were large fellows, with large shoes and heavy bodies. Fortunately for us, they were still asleep when we came upon them. They had no tent and had made no fire. They slept on a bed of leaves, with light blankets to cover them.

Lacro and Stilensis had brought their hunting bows. While they nocked arrows and took aim, Eco and I yanked away the men's blankets. They woke at once, scrambled to their feet, then froze when they saw the arrows aimed at them. They cursed in some native tongue.

Lacro asked them what they had done with the white fawn. The men grumbled and pointed toward a thick patch of bushes.

Within, in a little clearing, Eco and I came upon the creature. She was tied to a small tree, asleep with her legs folded beneath her. At our approach, she stirred and lifted her head. I expected her to scramble up and try to bolt away. Instead, she stared at us sleepily and blinked several times, then threw back her head and seemed to yawn. She slowly and methodically unfolded her limbs and got to her feet, then sauntered toward us and lifted her face to be nuzzled. Eco let out a gasp of delight as he stroked the back of his hand against the shimmering white fur beneath her eyes.

We marched our prisoners through the marsh and then along the river road, with Eco leading the fawn by her leash, or as often as not being led by her. We stopped short of Sertorius's camp, and

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while the others waited in a secluded spot by the river, I went to give the general the news.

I arrived just in time. Only a single tent—the general's—was still standing. The troops had already begun the westward march toward the highlands. Sertorius and his staff were busily packing wagons and seeing to the final details of disbanding the camp.

Sertorius was the first to see me. He froze for an instant, then strode toward me. His face seemed to glow in the morning light. "It's good news, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Is she well?"

"Yes."

"And the scoundrels who took her—did you capture them as well?"

"Two men, both native Spaniards."

"I knew it! I woke up this morning with a feeling that something wonderful would happen. Where is she? Take me to her at once! No, wait." He turned and called to his staff. "Come along, all of you. Wonderful news! Come and see!"

Among the officers I saw Mamercus carrying a cabinet out of the general's tent. "Put that down, Mamercus, and come see what the Finder has caught for us!" shouted Sertorius. "Something white! And two black-hearted Spaniards with her!"

Mamercus looked confused for a moment, then put down the cabinet. He nodded and stepped back into the tent.

"Come, Gordianus. Take me to her at once!" said Sertorius, pulling at my arm.

On the banks of the Sucro, the general and his fawn were reunited. I don't think I had ever seen a Roman general weep before. I certainly know that I had never seen one pick up a fawn and carry it about in his arms like a baby. For all his protestations that the white fawn was only a tool of statecraft, a cynical means of exploiting superstitions he did not share, I think that the creature meant much more than that to Sertorius. While she might not have whispered to him in the voice of Diana, or foretold the future, the white fawn was the visible sign of the gods' favor, without which every man is naked before his enemies. What I saw on the banks of the Sucro was the exultation of a man whose luck had deserted him and then had returned in the blink of an eye.

But Sertorius was a Roman general and not given to undue sentimentality even about his own destiny. After a while he put down the fawn and turned to the two Spaniards we had captured. He

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spoke to them in their own dialect. Lacro whispered a translation in my ear.

They had treated the fawn well, Sertorius said, and had not harmed her; that was wise, and showed a modicum of respect for the goddess. But they had flouted the dignity of a Roman general and had interfered with the will of the goddess; and a young virgin had been murdered. For that they would be punished.

The two men comported themselves with considerable dignity, considering that they were likely to be slain on the spot. They conferred with each other for a moment, then one of them spoke. They were only hirelings, they explained. They knew nothing of a murdered girl. They had merely agreed to meet a man at the edge of the camp two nights ago. He had brought the fawn to them, wrapped in a blanket. They were to hide with the fawn in the marsh until Sertorius and his army were gone. They would never have harmed the creature, nor would they have harmed the girl who kept her.

Sertorius told them that he had suspected as much, that one of his own men—indeed, someone on his own staff, with adequate knowledge of the general's routine and the workings of the camp—must have been behind the kidnapping. If the two Spaniards were willing to point out this man, the severity of their own punishment might be considerably mitigated.

The two men conferred again. They agreed.

Sertorius stepped back and gestured to the members of his assembled staff. The two Spaniards looked from face to face, then shook their heads. The man was not among them.

Sertorius frowned and surveyed his staff. He stiffened. I saw a flash of pain in his eyes. He sighed and turned to me. "One of my men isn't here, Finder."

"Yes, I see. He must have stayed behind."

Sertorius ordered some of his men to stay and guard the fawn. The rest of us hurried back with him to the camp.

"Look there! His horse is still here," said Sertorius.

"Then he hasn't fled," I said. "Perhaps he had no reason to flee. Perhaps he had nothing to do with the kidnapping—"

But I knew this could not be the case, even as Eco and I followed Sertorius into his tent. Amid the clutter of folded cots and chairs, Mamercus lay quivering on the ground, transfixed on his own sword. His right hand still gripped the pommel. In his left hand he clutched the virgin's white scarf.

He was still alive. We knelt beside him. He began to whisper.

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We bent our heads close. "I never meant to kill the girl," he said. "She was asleep, and should have stayed that way . . . from the drug . . . but she woke. I couldn't let her scream. I meant to pull the scarf across her mouth . . . but then it was around her throat . . . and she wouldn't stop struggling. She was stronger than you might think. . . ."

Sertorius shook his head. "But why, Mamercus? Why kidnap the fawn? You were my man!"

"No, never," said Mamercus. "I was Pompey's man! One of his agents in Rome hired me to be Pompey's spy. They said you would trust me . . . take me into your confidence . . . because of my father. They wanted someone to steal the white fawn from you. Not to kill it, just to steal it. You see, Gordianus, I never betrayed my grandfather. Tell him that."

"But why did you take up with Pompey?" I said.

He grimaced. "For money, of course! We were ruined. How could I ever have a career in Rome without money? Pompey offered me more than enough."

I shook my head. "You should have come back to Rome with me."

Mamercus managed a rueful smile. "At first I thought you were a messenger from Pompey. I couldn't believe he could be so stupid, to send a messenger for me into the camp, in broad daylight! Then you said you came from my grandfather . . . dear, beloved grandfather. I suppose the gods were trying to tell me something, but it was too late. My plan was set for that very night. I couldn't turn back." He coughed. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. "But I turned your visit to my advantage! I showed Sertorius the letter . . . vowed that I had no intention of leaving him . . . not even to please my grandfather! How could he not trust me after that? Sertorius, forgive me! But Gordianus—"

He released his sword and blindly gripped my arm. With his other hand he still clutched the scarf. "Don't tell grandfather about the girl! Tell him I was a spy, if you want. Tell him I died doing my duty. Tell him I had the courage to fall on my own sword. But not about the girl . . ."

His grip loosened. The light went out of his eyes. The scarf slipped from his fingers.

I looked at Sertorius. On his face I saw anger, disappointment, grief, confusion. I realized that Mamercus Claudius, like the white fawn, had meant more to him than he would say. Mamercus had been a sort of talisman for him, in the way that a son is a

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talisman—a sign of the gods' love, a pointer to a brighter future. But Mamercus had been none of those things, and the truth was hard for Sertorius to bear. How had he described Mamercus to me? "Bright, curious, clever, wholly committed to the cause." How painfully ironic those words seemed now!

I think that in that moment Sertorius saw that the white fawn counted for nothing after all; that his days were numbered; that the might of Rome would never cease hounding him until he was destroyed and all traces of his rival state were obliterated from the earth. He picked up the scarf and pressed it to his face, covering his eyes, and for that I was thankful.

The voyage back to Rome seemed long and tedious, yet not nearly long enough; I was not looking forward to meeting with Gaius Claudius and giving him the news.

I had done exactly as he asked: I had found his grandson, delivered the letter, invited Mamercus to flee. I had accepted the task and completed it. When Sertorius asked me to find the white fawn, how could I have known the end?

None of us could have known the outcome of my trip to Spain, least of all Gaius Claudius. And yet, if Gaius had not sent me to find his grandson, Mamercus might still have been alive. Would the old man be able to bear the bitterness of it, that seeking only to bring the boy safely home, he himself had instigated the events that led to the boy's destruction?

And yet, surely Mamercus alone was responsible for his downfall. He had deceived his grandfather, no matter that he loved him; had been a spy for a man and a cause he did not love; had murdered an innocent girl. And for what? All for money; nothing but that.

I should not waste a single tear on the boy, I told myself, leaning over the rail of the ship that carried me back to Rome. It was night. The sky was black and the moon was full, her face spread upon the dark waters like a great pool of white light. Perhaps I did shed a tear for Mamercus Claudius, but the cold breeze plucked it at once from my cheek and dropped it into the vastness of the salty sea. There it was lost in an instant, and surely never counted for anything in the scales of justice, either as reckoned by mortals or by the gods. ●

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The Night Before Christmas

Adrienne B. Gorman

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house
Every creature was scurrying about like a mouse.
The stockings weren't hung by the chimney with care;
Of course, the Christmas tree also was bare.
The toys weren't assembled; no packages wrapped;
The cookies all burned and had to be scrapped.
The children, not nestled each in his bed,
Were watching sitcom reruns instead.
The oldest sat ogling adult-fare TV
Where Sugar Plum Fairy danced in her G.
And I, in my teddy, and Pop, in the buff,
Had just settled in for some pretty hot stuff,
When out in the kitchen something loud clattered;
I sprang from my bed to see what thing had shattered.
Away to the kitchen I flew in a fright;
Fell over the dog and went out like a light.
Then, what to my wavering sight should appear
But some linebacker type in ski-mask headgear.
His eyes, how they glinted; his whiskers, how hairy,
With biceps that bulged, he was huge and scary.
He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work.
He grabbed all our goodies, then turned with a smirk,
And, giving the finger and a jolly Hee-Hee,
With one hard push, he knocked over the tree.
He sprang to his truck and floored the gas pedal;
Away he roared to the beat of heavy metal.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"Merry Christmas to you! Lock your doors at night!"

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A Shipment of Snow

by Edward D. Hoch

Winter's precipitation has figured in many a mystery story: think of icicle daggers, snowbound country houses, corpses in snowmen. We doubt readers will be able to cite another mystery, however, in which the wintry scene is southern Florida and the snow shipped in by the truckload, though the author tells us they really do such things in the sunbelt.

When Susan Holt stepped out of the Fort Myers airport wheeling her floral-patterned suitcase, a wave of Florida heat hit her like a hammer. The temperature had been hovering around the freezing mark a few hours earlier in Manhattan. The change had been a bit sudden for her, and the air conditioning in the rental car felt especially good. It was also a treat driving with an uncluttered windshield after the registration and inspection stickers required on New York cars.

Her position in store promotions for Mayfield's of Manhattan often took her to other cities. South Florida was not as exotic as Japan or Iceland or even London, but it was a nice change from the crowds of Fifth Avenue shoppers bundled against the first flurries of winter. Heading south on route 75, bound for a big shopping mall near Naples, she tried to convince herself that the two-night stay was really necessary. Certainly the type of Christmas shopping promotion planned by Gulfpalm would be out of place in New York. A shipment of snow from the north was hardly needed there, even in a mild winter, and there'd be no space near the store to dump it anyway. Gulfpalm's facility, surrounded by a sea of mall parking lots, was another matter entirely.

Susan checked into her Naples hotel by midafternoon and called her contact at the store. Marci Chester sounded young and perky over the phone, urging her to come right out for a look around

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before the big snow event the following morning. "Sounds good," Susan decided. "I'll be there shortly."

She'd seen photographs of the Gulfpalm store, but it was even more impressive as she drove up and parked in the massive lot. Two stories high, it swept around in a gentle curve to connect with one end of a gigantic shopping mall. Approaching the main entrance, past dancing fountains and groves of palm trees, Susan could almost imagine herself at a first-class Vegas casino. Inside, all was brightness and glass, with wide aisles in the cosmetics department that signaled luxury in both product and price tag.

Marci Chester was as perky as her voice. Still in her twenties, she had the sort of big blond hair and perfect skin that was fashionable these days. "Great to meet you at last, Susan!" she enthused. "Seems like we've been writing and talking to each other for months. I want you to meet Mr. Vangridge, our store manager, before I show you around."

Susan glanced at her watch. "It's going on five. I don't want to keep you if that's your quitting time."

"I'll be here late tonight making sure everything's lined up for the promotion. We did this last year and had a real mob of people. All these transplanted northerners brought the kids to see the first snow of their young lives."

They rode up on the gleaming glass-sided escalator to the second floor. Benjamin Vangridge's office was over in one corner with promotions, art, advertising, purchasing, and the other departments. "Everything is right here," Susan noted, thinking of the scattered offices in her own Manhattan store.

"Everything but billing. That's handled by the home office in Atlanta."

Obviously they were expected, and the secretary waved them through while pushing a buzzer. Vangridge was a tall, silver-haired man who looked exactly like the pictures Susan had seen in the trade magazines. He smiled and shook hands and welcomed her to the Gulfpalm store. She took a chair opposite his desk and found herself surprised by his southern drawl, something the magazine photographs couldn't reveal.

"It's a pleasure to be here," she assured him. "It's not every day I fly four hours to see a truckload of snow."

Marci lifted a black scrapbook that occupied a corner of the president's desk. "Here's what we have so far, just from this year. I think we're going to top last Christmas, at least for publicity."

The first item was from yesterday's *Buffalo Evening News*, a

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three-column captioned photo from page one of the second section. It showed workmen using shovels and a bulldozer to fill a truck with snow: *Flakes to Florida! A large refrigerated truck is loaded with some of Buffalo's recent snowfall, starting a 1,500-mile journey to a shopping mall near Naples, Florida. The Gulfpalm department store rented the truck and will use the snow to launch its Christmas shopping season this Saturday morning.*

Susan turned the page and found a folded full-page ad from the Naples paper: *It'll be snowing bargains at Gulfpalm this Saturday! Bring the whole family—especially those who've never seen snow before! Souvenirs, prizes, snowman contests! Fun for all!* On the opposite page were news articles about the event. The truck from Buffalo was scheduled to pull in at ten o'clock, and the pile of snow was expected to last throughout the day, despite temperatures in the seventies.

Vangridge smiled. "I don't have to tell you the object is to generate traffic in the store. Last year's event was extremely popular and got the holiday season off to a fine start. Unfortunately, the early winter weather was so mild we had to settle for shaved ice from a plant in north Florida. It looks pretty much like snow."

"Did you go up to Buffalo yourself this year?"

"No, no. Our ad manager, Hank Burnside, makes the trip. Not in the truck—he flies up and back. Marci keeps the publicity flowing at this end."

"I have plenty of help," she assured Susan.

"Mr. Vangridge, can you tell me something about the population base you draw upon here?"

"Please call me Ben." He was every inch the southern gentleman, flirting just a bit with this carpetbagger from Manhattan. She wouldn't be surprised if he invited her to dinner before she flew back north. "Most of our customers come from Naples and North Naples, though our location near the route 75 highway makes us accessible from Fort Myers and points north. Naples itself has grown tremendously in recent years." He had the sort of pleasant, flowing voice Susan enjoyed listening to, and she was almost sorry when Marci Chester suggested a few moments later that they should get on with the tour. "Is there anything here you can take back to Manhattan?" he asked as she was leaving.

"I hope so. Perhaps our two stores could run a joint event next Christmas—Snow Day at Gulfpalm and Sun Day at Mayfield's. It's worth thinking about."

Ben Vangridge shook hands again, giving her a particularly

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warm smile. "I'll be downstairs in the morning when the truck from Buffalo rolls in. I'm sure we'll see each other then."

Though the Gulfpalm store hardly compared to Mayfield's, Susan was impressed with many modern features that added comfort and convenience to the shopping experience. She even found herself complimenting Marci about the spacious ladies' room where they paused near the end of the tour. They finished up at the young woman's second-floor office, where Susan was introduced to the advertising manager, Hank Burnside.

"Susan Holt from Mayfield's of Manhattan," Marci announced. "Susan, this is Hank Burnside." He was good-looking, thirty or so, with rumpled brown hair and a bit of a squint. A pencil was stuck behind his ear.

"Pleased to meet you," he said, letting his eyes roam quickly down her body in its fashionable gray suit. "Is that what they're wearing in New York this winter?"

"I didn't bring my winter clothes to Florida," she replied. "Should I have?"

His eyes came back to her face. "A bathing suit is fine, if you've got one."

Susan dismissed the topic with a shrug. "I'm only here two days. Hardly enough time to get all sandy."

"You could have brought us some New York City snow."

She shook her head. "Just rain so far this season."

He seemed to lose interest in their banter and suddenly turned to the telephone. "I have to call the TV station, schedule two more spots for tonight. 'Bye for now. See you later."

"He's a nice guy," Marci said after he'd left, "but you may want to be busy if he asks you out to dinner."

Susan grinned. "Thanks for the tip. Is this personal experience speaking?"

"You bet! Come on, I'll walk you to your car and show you where we're dumping the snow."

The parking lot at Gulfpalm's end of the mall was actually divided into two sections split by a landscaped strip. "That's for the Christmas overflow," Marci explained, waving toward the farthest area. "The Lincoln you see there belongs to Mr. Vangridge. For tomorrow the lot becomes a winter wonderland with tons of snow all the way from Buffalo. The kids will be climbing on it and throwing snowballs and even making snowmen, all right here in sunny Florida with the temperature in the seventies."

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"I'll see you then," Susan promised. "It sounds great!"

As she got into her car she was aware of a middle-aged man with a dark complexion, perhaps a Cuban. He stood by his car in the next row, openly watching her, though he made no attempt to approach. She thought no more about him as she pulled out of the parking lot and headed back to the hotel.

Susan Holt read the morning paper over breakfast and saw the two-page spread announcing Snow Day at Gulfpalm. The features for children and adults, including the presence of Santa Claus and a high-school band, were boxed and printed in bold type on the left-hand page. An illustration of romping youngsters dominated the opposite page. Hank Burnside and the advertising department had done a nice job. She wasn't surprised when she pulled into the mall parking lot at nine-thirty to see several dozen cars already there, awaiting the truckload of Buffalo's snow. It was a sunny morning with the temperature already over seventy.

Susan spotted Marci Chester at once, clutching a clipboard as she hurried back and forth between various groups. As yet there was no sign of Ben Vangridge, but his car was in its parking space. Hank Burnside came over as soon as he saw her. "Good to see you again, Susan. I'll bet they don't do things like this on Fifth Avenue."

"Our big treat is when they cart the snow away, not bring it in." She happened to scan the crowd and saw again the dark man she'd noticed as she left the store the previous afternoon. "Do you know that fellow over there?" she asked Burnside.

"That's Jimmy Garcia, our security chief. Don't worry, he stares at everyone like that."

"He looks like he might be Cuban."

"He is. Born and raised there. He fought Castro for a long time, then took a boat across about ten years ago. Most of the Cubans settle around the Miami area, and I met him there through some Cuban friends. He came over to our Gulf Coast and Vangridge gave him a job. I'll introduce you later."

Their conversation was interrupted by a cheer from the crowd as a big silver truck with New York plates turned into the parking lot. Across its side was strung a banner, no doubt repeated on the opposite side: *A Shipment of Snow, from Buffalo to Gulfpalm with Love!* The high-school band struck up a lively rendition of "Winter Wonderland."

Hank Burnside left Susan's side to greet the two drivers, who

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were responding to the cheers. Susan moved over behind a young mother with three children who were about to witness their first snow. "It's white and it's very, very cold! Your father and I moved south to get away from it."

"Will it hurt us?" a small child wanted to know.

"It can freeze your little fingers, but I'll make sure it doesn't. Come on! They're dumping it now!"

The truck had tipped its cargo section and the huge mound of snow slid out easily, forming an impressive pile in the parking lot. As the children broke free and ran toward the snow, it was Garcia, the security chief, who first noticed something wrong. He held up both hands and shouted, "Back! Everyone stay back!"

Susan ran up to the other side of the snow pile, where Marci stood still clutching her clipboard. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure going to find out." Marci ignored the warning to stay back and hurried over to Garcia. "Why did you stop them?" she asked. "What's the trouble?"

Then, edging forward a bit, Susan saw it too. An arm clad in a dark suit coat was protruding from the snow. The security chief shouted at the drivers. "What's this? Help me here!"

Mothers covered their youngsters' eyes, and one woman screamed. Garcia and the drivers brushed some snow away and they saw that it was indeed a body. Benjamin Vangridge, president of Gulfpalm, was impossibly dead in the snow that had just arrived from Buffalo.

It was Marci Chester's quick wits that saved the day. Seeing that body surrounded by horrified mothers and gaping children, she ran over to the band and ordered them to lead a march away from the scene. She pulled some mothers and children into line behind the band and within minutes a parade was snaking its way across the parking lot.

Many of the children turned to look back at the mound of snow, where Vangridge's body appeared from a distance like a great black bird tumbled from the sky. But their mothers urged them on and soon the parade had worked its way to the far end of the mall, with Santa Claus keeping pace all the way. "Don't worry," she heard Marci shout to the children. "We'll be back to play in the snow before long. You'll have the whole day there."

Susan had followed the parade for a time, leaving the death scene to the store employees. She'd noticed Hank Burnside on his cellular phone almost at once, calling the police. Within minutes a

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patrol car was on the scene, quickly followed by an ambulance and an unmarked car with a roof flasher. Never one to shy away from the police, she headed back toward the action.

Garcia was explaining what he knew to a tall detective with small, piercing eyes and thin blond hair. He noticed her as soon as she came up, and when she started edging away he reached out to touch her arm. "Did you see all this too, miss?"

"Yes, I did."

"I'll be with you in just a minute," he said, winding up his conversation with the security chief. "Stay right there."

Burnside hurried up with one of his young women assistants. "Can you tell us how soon the body will be out of there so we can resume our Snow Day event? Time is pretty important with that sun beating down."

"You're—?"

"Hank Burnside, the store's advertising manager."

The detective tried a smile, but it didn't fit with his face. "I'm Sergeant Appleton. I guess it'll take us some time."

"An hour, two hours? Don't you just photograph the body and take it away?"

Appleton's attempt at a smile faded. "The dead man is Gulfpalm's manager, right? His body is over there with a chest wound. It looks very much as if he was murdered. Your security chief tells me he was in the store yesterday. So what's he doing in a truck full of snow that left Buffalo two days ago?"

"I—I don't know," Burnside admitted.

"Neither do I. And we're going to have to search through every bit of that snow for some sort of clue. When we're finished, you can have what's left." He turned on Susan as Burnside beat a hasty retreat. "Now what about you?"

"I don't know. You said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yeah. I'm Sergeant Appleton. Are you a store employee?"

"Not this store. My name is Susan Holt. I'm in the promotions department at Mayfield's in New York. I flew down for two days to see how their Snow Day came off."

"I'd say it's come off poorly so far. Did you know Ben Vangridge?"

"I just met him yesterday."

"Then he was here in the store."

"Oh yes. We had a nice chat."

"Any idea how his body got into that truck with the snow?"

"None whatsoever. Can you tell how long he's been dead?"

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"Not with the body packed in snow like that. Maybe the medical examiner can take a guess."

A detective came over with one of the drivers. "This is Walt Creasey. He was driving when the truck pulled in."

Creasey was a bearded man in plaid shirt and jeans, wearing a baseball cap backward on his head. With the beard it was difficult to estimate his age, though there were a few gray strands visible in it. "Hey," he said, "I don't know anything about this body. The truck was already loaded when I took over."

"Where was that, sir?" the detective asked. Susan had the feeling it wasn't good when he called someone "sir."

"Buffalo, New York, where the snow is!"

"You drove it alone?"

"Hell, no! It's over fifteen hundred miles and they wanted it here quick. This is my partner, Pierre Rivage."

Sergeant Appleton eyed a short dark man with a thin moustache and glasses, who'd come up to join them. "You French?" he asked.

"French-Canadian," the man answered with a slight accent. "We often team up on these long trips."

The detective shifted his attention back to Creasey. "Where'd you stop overnight?"

"We didn't. One of us drove while the other slept. We left Buffalo right after dinner on Thursday and drove through two nights. Ate at truck stops on the way."

"You must have stopped somewhere else."

"Didn't," Rivage confirmed. "We stayed on the road. Would have made better time except for a storm in West Virginia."

"What about this morning?"

"Got to Naples a bit after eight. We lingered over breakfast so there'd be a crowd here to greet us. I was driving and then after breakfast Walt took over."

"So how did Vangridge's body get in your truck?"

"Beats me," Walt Creasey said. "Maybe it got put in with the snow up in Buffalo."

"Several people saw him here yesterday afternoon, after you were already on the way," Appleton said. Susan could see that his patience was wearing thin. He was a detective who thrived on the routine of robberies, drug busts, and domestic violence. A bizarre case like this was beyond his comprehension. He wanted easy answers and there weren't any.

Creasey looked frightened. "Do me and my buddy need a lawyer?"

"Not if you have nothing to hide. I want a list of all the places

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you two stopped on the way here, what you ate, how long it took. I want times, addresses, everything you can give me."

Marci had come over to see what was happening. Appleton confiscated her clipboard and gave it to the drivers for their list. "You should just concentrate on the Florida stops," Susan advised him. "Vangridge couldn't have intercepted them any further north."

"You think he went off to meet the truck?" Marci asked.

"How else could it have happened?" Susan reasoned. "Maybe he intended to arrive with it as a surprise to everyone. Then something happened and he was killed. They foolishly put him in the truck rather than leaving him by the side of the road."

"That's a nice theory," the detective said. "Any proof for it?"

"Not yet," Susan admitted. "But I've been lucky in the past, helping the police."

"You do this sort of thing regular?"

"It's not my job. Things just happen to me."

"Well, you two ladies better run along now. This is my job and I'd better get at it."

Susan shook her head and moved away with Marci. "Is he always like that?"

"Don't ask me. I only met him once before, when he investigated a break-in at the store."

"That's more in his line. Was anything taken?"

"Some rifles from our sporting goods department. Nothing big."

Susan could hear the high-school band still playing from around the back of the mall. She noticed that a couple of patrolmen were shoveling the small mountain of snow, really just tossing it from one pile to another. It didn't seem that they'd found anything yet. Meanwhile, the body was being photographed and videotaped from all angles. When the photographer finished with the body he took several shots of the truck. Susan opened the door and peered into the cab. Behind the seats was a cramped-looking mattress for sleeping. She studied the instruments and the clear windshield, unmarked except for a few splattered highway bugs. Then she closed the door and returned to Marci.

She was chewing at her lipstick, sneaking an occasional peek at her watch. "I've gotta get those kids back to the snow pile before the whole thing melts. Won't they ever finish?"

"It looks as if they're finishing up with the body. And those two with the shovels sure aren't finding anything."

More cars were arriving, bringing more children to play in the snow. Marci went back over to Sergeant Appleton as soon as the

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body had been removed. "Can't you give us back our snow pile?" she pleaded.

He walked over and spoke quietly to the two officers who had just about finished their shovel work. "All right," he said, turning to her. "It's all yours."

Marci grinned and ran over to tell Jimmy Garcia. "Signal the band to start back this way with the kids. It's Snow Day at last!"

Susan spent much of the next hour circulating among the parents and children, some of whom were experiencing snow for the first time. She heard one mother warn her children against throwing snowballs because they were too icy, and indeed the snow seemed icy to Susan's touch. A day and a half in the truck had not helped its consistency.

A bit later, joining Susan for a late lunch in the store's cafe, Marci sat back and sighed. "I think it's going well, all things considered. How does it look from your New York viewpoint?"

Susan took a bite of her club sandwich to give herself a moment in phrasing a reply. "I suppose if Mayfield's manager was found murdered outside the store we might have closed the place and canceled all events for the day."

"That wasn't my decision," Marci hastened to explain. "Hank phoned the owners in Atlanta and they said as long as the snow was here we should go ahead rather than disappoint the children."

"Doesn't Vangridge have a wife?"

"Divorced, and she moved to California."

"No rumors about affairs with employees? It happens at Mayfield's all the time."

Marci shrugged. "A few jokes about the assistant manager."

"Who's that?"

"Ann O'Toole. She's head of purchasing. I don't think you've met her. But nobody takes the jokes seriously."

"This whole thing isn't any of my business, but I've had some experience investigating crime. If you'd like me to look into this—"

Marci was obviously uncertain what to do. Finally she said, "Come on, I'll see if we can find Ann." She paid the check and they went back outside.

When they located Ann O'Toole she was talking to Garcia, trying to work out the details of what had happened. "I just got here," she told Marci. "This is terrible!" She was slender and tanned, around forty, fairly attractive but with a take-charge attitude that

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would turn some men off. Susan decided she could have been a schoolteacher. "Has Atlanta been notified?"

"Hank Burnside phoned them. They told us to go ahead with Snow Day."

"They would." She looked exasperated. "Their store manager is dead, for God's sake!"

"This is Susan Holt from Mayfield's of Manhattan. Remember? I mentioned she wanted to come down and study our promotion."

Ann O'Toole tried to smile. "I'm afraid you're not seeing us at our best, Susan."

"I wonder if I might help in some way. I was telling Marci I've had some experience with criminal investigations."

"Thank you, but I'm sure the police can handle it."

"Did Mr. Vangridge say anything about going out to meet the snow truck?" Susan asked, as if she hadn't heard the woman decline her offer of help.

"Not to me, and I was talking to him just last night."

Jimmy Garcia had started walking away during their conversation, but Susan wanted to speak to him. She caught up with him and said, "I guess we haven't been formally introduced."

"I know who you are," he replied.

"I saw you watching me yesterday when I got into my car."

"I watch everyone. It's my job." He flexed the fingers of his right hand as he spoke, as if keeping his gun hand limber. On second thought, she wondered if he even carried a gun. At Mayfield's the security men usually didn't.

"Were you working last night?" she asked.

"I was here till the store closed. Ten o'clock. Friday nights are busy, so I'm usually here."

"Did Mr. Vangridge work late?"

"The detective asked me that too. A lot of them were here till ten because of Snow Day this morning. Vangridge and Burnside and Marci. Miss O'Toole, too. They were going over last-minute details, I guess."

The man seemed reasonably friendly now and Susan decided he was her best chance of learning more about the police investigation. "Look, I think I can help locate the killer but I need a list of the stops the truck drivers made. Could you ask Sergeant Appleton for it?"

"I got a copy already," he told her. "The sergeant asked me to run some off on my copier so his men could start checking the truck stops right away. Appleton knows what he's doing."

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"I guess he does," Susan agreed. "Do you think I could just have a peek at it?"

"It's confidential."

"Then how come you have a copy?"

"I made an extra for myself."

"Does Appleton know about it?"

He sighed and reached into his breast pocket. "It won't tell you much."

At first glance she was ready to believe him. They'd stopped for breakfast in North Naples around eight o'clock. The previous stop had been after midnight somewhere outside Tampa, at a truck stop with a neon dolphin jumping from the water. They didn't remember the name. Walt Creasey had gone in for coffee and the rest room, staying about fifteen minutes in all. The Canadian, Pierre Rivage, had remained in the truck sleeping. Creasey brought him some coffee, and after drinking it Rivage took over the driving while Creasey slept.

"Would you like to take a run up there?" she asked the security man, pointing to the stop north of Tampa.

"What for? The police are checking it. Couldn't have happened there anyway. The Canadian was asleep in the truck. The sound of the shot, or the truck doors being pushed up, would have wakened him."

Susan smiled. "Don't you remember Sherlock Holmes? When you've excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. I think the killer left something there, and I think he'll be back for it."

"We don't even know the name of the truck stop, except that it has a neon dolphin on its sign."

"That should be easy to find."

"Hell, it's a three-hour drive from here, probably more. And what's there to see after you get there?"

She didn't have any answer to that, and couldn't really blame him for declining her offer. What *was* there to see after she got there, except the uncertain scene of the crime? She needed more than a wild idea that was bouncing around in her head.

It was Sergeant Appleton who finally decided her. She was watching the snowman judging when he intercepted her. "Been asking lots of questions, haven't you?"

"My store in Manhattan expects a full report on Gulfpalm's Snow Day, and that includes all the glitches. I'm just trying

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to figure out how to word it. I could use some help."

"It's far too soon for me to comment on the case. We're just now beginning our investigation."

"But he was shot, wasn't he?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"And the drivers must be your primary suspects. No one else would have had the key to open the truck."

"Certainly they're under suspicion. Finding a motive is the difficult part. Apparently Vangridge wasn't robbed. Why was he killed? How and where was he placed in the truck? And if it happened north of here, what was he doing up there in the first place?"

"I can answer some of those questions for you," she said, with a bit more confidence than she really felt. All she had at the moment was a vague hunch. "But first tell me if your men have learned anything. Have they checked out the last few places the truck stopped on its trip down?"

"There was nothing at the North Naples place. We asked the Tampa police to check the truck stop in that area and they just notified me there's nothing suspicious at that scene either. No one remembers the truck with the banners on it, but the night crew would be home sleeping now. They promised to have someone check again after midnight."

"I'd like to go up there."

He smiled like a father humoring a child. "Why, Miss Holt? Do you think you can find something the police missed?"

"I may know what to look for."

He turned away, not about to get involved with amateur sleuths. "Let me know if you find anything interesting."

"What's the name of that truck stop in Tampa?" she called after him. "The one with the neon dolphin."

"The Neon Dolphin. How's that for a name?"

The last of the snow was melting in the Florida heat when she found Marci Chester bidding goodbye to the family responsible for the best snowman. "You've put in a long day."

The perky young woman hardly had a hair out of place. "I thrive on it." She smiled.

"Even with your boss being found dead?"

"Not that, of course. But the hustle and bustle of an event like this. I can't imagine working anywhere else."

"Look, Marci, I've got a crazy idea about where Ben Vangridge might have been killed. It's a truck stop near Tampa, about three hours from here."

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"Why do you think it was there?"

"Because nowhere else makes sense at all. And I think the killer left something up there."

"But the body and the truck and the snow are all down here," Marci insisted. "What else is there? Even if Ben was killed up there, the murderer isn't still hanging around."

"I have to go. Want to come with me?"

Marci's face turned serious. "I have a sort of date tonight, with Hank Burnside. We wanted to unwind together, after all that's happened. You know how it is."

"Sure. Go ahead. I didn't realize you two were an item."

"We're not, really."

"Have a good time."

Susan went back to her car and took out the map the rental agency had given her. Tampa was a clear shot up route 75. Maybe she could make it in less than three hours if the traffic was light.

"I'll go with you," a voice behind her said. She turned to see Jimmy Garcia standing there. The security man was carrying his jacket and she could see the holster on his belt. "Get in. I'll drive. I can make better time."

"Are you sure you want—?"

"Get in."

The highway unwound before them as Garcia drove north toward Tampa. At first he said very little, but finally Susan decided some conversation was necessary. "What made you change your mind about coming with me?"

At first he didn't answer. Finally, perhaps to fill the silence between them, he said, "Vangridge was a good man. He gave me a job when I needed one. I guess I owe him this much."

"Do you know who killed him?"

"It had to be one of those drivers. I can't figure out why, though."

"That's what we're going to find out. Sergeant Appleton says the place we want is called the Neon Dolphin. Ever hear of it?"

He shook his head, speeding up to pass a van. "Those truck stop places are pretty much alike."

"Some are different," Susan said.

"How do you mean?"

"Sometimes they have a parking lot where drivers can leave their rigs overnight to be picked up by a relief driver. Sort of a transfer point."

"But the truck is at Gulfpalm. There was no transfer."

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Susan said no more about it, shifting the conversation to the weather. "It must be great living down here, never having to worry about winter clothes or snow shovels."

"Do you live in Manhattan?"

"Yes."

"Married?"

"No. I was living with someone but we're having a trial separation at the moment. With the amount I travel each year it's difficult to maintain a relationship. What about you?"

Garcia smiled. "I have a wife and three kids. The only thing we ever argue about is politics. She thinks I should be more active in the Cuban community. I tell her I moved to this side of the state to get away from the Cuban community."

They reached Tampa around dinnertime and found the Neon Dolphin without difficulty. Susan was pleased to see the parking lot filled with a dozen or so trucks behind the restaurant. At least the trip hadn't been in vain. She parked her rental car and they strolled along the line of parked trucks until she stopped at one that might have been a twin of the snow truck from Buffalo.

"This is it," she announced. "Now all we have to do is open the padlock on the back doors."

"Do you mind telling me what we're looking for? Is it drugs?"

"Not drugs. They head north from here. This cargo came south." She walked to the back of the truck and took a look at the lock. "Think you could open this?"

It was almost dark and a spotlight on the roof of the truck stop illuminated only the front of the vehicles. Garcia used a small flashlight to study the padlock at the bottom of the door. "I'll give it a try." He slipped a small tool from his pocket and went at it like an expert. In a moment she heard a gentle click as the lock came open. Quickly removing the padlock, he pushed the door up far enough for them to peer inside with the aid of the flashlight.

"Boxes!" Susan said. "It's full of boxes."

"Crates, to be exact. Wooden crates."

"Give me a boost up."

She took his flashlight and moved closer. The crates were too heavy to move. "What is it?" Garcia asked.

"The motive for Ben Vangridge's murder."

Garcia climbed into the back of the truck after her, and she saw him reach for his revolver. She felt a familiar chill, and for a split-second wondered if she'd made a terrible mistake. Then he opened

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the cylinder and emptied the cartridges into the palm of his hand. "Here, maybe I can pry it open with this."

He inserted the revolver barrel under one of the wooden slats and pushed down while Susan held the flashlight. The nails were pulled loose and the slat came up easily. She turned the light down, into the crate.

"Guns! It's full of assault weapons!"

Jimmy Garcia nodded. "For sale to Cuban exiles. That's what this is all about. There are always Cubans ready to buy weapons for the next invasion, and arms dealers willing to sell them."

Suddenly they were blinded by a powerful light. "Don't move!" a familiar voice commanded from outside the truck. "I have a gun aimed at both of you."

Garcia raised his empty pistol. "And I have one aimed at you."

In another instant the man outside the truck might have fired, but he never had the chance. With the light in her eyes Susan couldn't see what was happening, but she heard the shouts and the scuffling. Then the light disappeared, replaced by another, less blinding, and Sergeant Appleton was climbing into the truck. "We've got him, Jimmy. Is she all right?"

Garcia snorted. "Let her tell you."

Susan took a deep breath. "It's Hank Burnside, isn't it? I recognized his voice."

"That's him, Miss Holt. Now suppose you tell us how you knew about this truck."

Somebody went into the truck stop for coffee and Appleton took time to introduce a couple of Tampa detectives, explaining what he was doing there. "Jimmy Garcia believed you were on to something. He told me he'd drive up here with you if I could be here too. So I flew up in a police helicopter and got here ahead of you."

Garcia seemed pleased with himself. "If you were right about the killer leaving something here, I figured he'd be coming back for it. I wanted to catch him just as bad as you."

She took her cup of coffee and walked over to the police car where Hank Burnside, Gulfpalm's ad manager, sat in handcuffs. "You should hear this too, so you'll know what you did wrong."

"I didn't do anything wrong. There's no way you could have known about that truck."

Appleton interrupted the exchange. "Perhaps you'd better tell us what happened first, Miss Holt, and why Vangridge was killed."

"Burnside here was earning some extra money selling illegal

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guns to Cuban exiles in south Florida. That earlier theft of rifles from the store was probably his doing. I guess police surveillance had gotten a little tight lately, and with Gulfpalm about to repeat its Snow Day, he decided the perfect way to bring a shipment of weapons into the area from the north was in a truck proudly announcing it was carrying snow to Florida. He dumped the snow outside Buffalo and filled the truck with the guns."

Already Appleton was shaking his head. "If the truck was full of guns, how did they deliver snow to the parking lot this morning?"

Susan gestured at the truck. "That answer was obvious to me almost from the beginning. There were two almost identical trucks. The switch was made here. The two drivers were switched and the truck's license plates were switched. When the truck arrived today it needed to have the New York plates it started with, and that's where you made your mistake, Hank. New York vehicles carry registration and inspection stickers on their front windshields. Florida vehicles don't. The truck that pulled in with its New York plates and cargo of snow had a bare windshield. When I had a chance to examine the snow itself I realized it was shaved ice. It came from the same Florida plant as last year's so-called snow. That got me thinking. If the snow was loaded in Florida, what had the original truck carried this far? What had the killer left at this truck stop, which was the only possible transfer point? When we got here it was easy to spot the truck because it had Florida plates but New York stickers on its windshield."

"Did you know Burnside was involved?"

"Almost certainly. Vangridge must have planned to meet the truck here and ride the rest of the way with them. That was strange in itself. He could have accomplished the same dramatic effect getting on a few blocks from the store. I think he suspected something. Maybe the ice company phoned him about the order. In any event, he drove up here after the store closed at ten o'clock. And he didn't come alone."

"How do you know that?"

"Because his Lincoln was still in its parking space this morning. That could mean only one thing. He drove with someone else, and that person had to be the killer. Otherwise, why didn't he report the crime to the police? Either he went in the killer's car or they took his car and the killer brought it back. I don't believe you planned to kill him, Hank, unless you had to. But he was suspicious of something and you convinced him you should go along." She turned back to the detective. "If the killer left the Gulfpalm

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store with Vangridge, it was almost certainly one of the four people working late with him—Garcia, Hank Burnside, Marci Chester, or Ann O'Toole. Of the four, Burnside was the most likely, simply because he'd been in Buffalo arranging for the shipment of snow. And he told me he met Garcia through Cuban friends in Miami. That gave him the connections for selling the guns to the right group. When I started asking people about this truck stop he heard about it and panicked. He followed us up here, hoping to move the guns before we found them."

"What about the drivers?"

"One of them, the Canadian Pierre Rivage, had to be involved. He claimed he was sleeping in the truck when the switch must have taken place. Once the license plates were changed, the other driver, Creasey, might not have realized it was a different truck. Rivage drove the rest of the way into Naples while he slept."

"Why do you think Vangridge was shot?" Appleton asked.

"I think Burnside and Vangridge drove up together and Vangridge spotted the two identical trucks. Maybe the driver opened one to show him the snow and then something happened. Burnside shot him and they put his body in with the snow because they had nowhere else to put it. They couldn't just leave it there with the guns the Cubans were buying and I don't suppose Burnside wanted it in the car with him."

"Rivage shot him!" the ad manager shouted from the back of the police car. "I didn't have anything to do with that part!"

"I think your gun will tell the story," Appleton said.

Burnside was in a panic. Perhaps he was remembering they had a death penalty in Florida. "The gun was Rivage's. He gave it to me to get rid of!"

"I'll have both drivers picked up," Appleton decided. "It seems to me Creasey might know more than he's admitting."

On Sunday morning Marci Chester phoned Susan's hotel as she was packing. "What's this about Hank being arrested for the murder? He never showed up for our date."

"Garcia can tell you all about it, Marci. I've been up half the night with the police and I'm all talked out. Besides, I have a plane to catch."

"Do you think something like this would go over at Mayfield's?"

"What? A truckload of snow, illegal weapons, and a murdered store manager? Not a chance! That's too much excitement for New York!" ●

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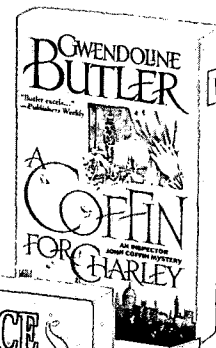

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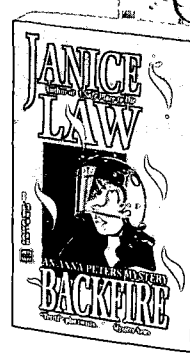

BACKFIRE
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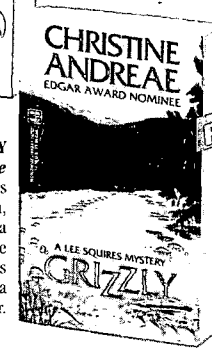

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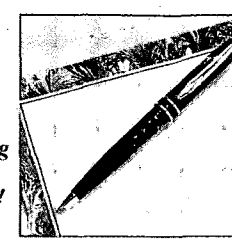

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